

# Factors Affecting Teaching and Learning in Mother Tongue in Public Lower Primary Schools in Kenya

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**Abstract** Kenya has legislated a Language in Education (LiE) policy to use mother tongue in lower primary classes (class 1-3), yet the pupils in Tabaka Division of Kenya continue to perform poorly in national examinations. The purpose of this study was to investigate factors affecting teaching and learning in mother tongue in lower public primary schools in Kenya. The Chomsky's theory of language acquisition was adopted. The study employed the sequential triangulation research design within the mixed methods approach. Questionnaires for teachers were used to collect quantitative data while qualitative data was collected using interview schedules, focus group discussions (FGDs) and observations. The validity of instruments was ensured by expert judgment by university lecturers while reliability was ensured by external consistency and a coefficient of  $r = 0.775$ . The target population comprised of 6000 pupils, 170 teachers, 17 head teachers, and 10 parents out of whom 90 pupils, 9 head teachers, 9 class three teachers, 10 parents and 1 Education Officer were sampled. Saturated sampling technique was used to select the head teachers, the primary schools, and class 3 teachers of lower primary, while simple random sampling was used to select the learners. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze quantitative data while interview data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The study reported that both teachers and learners had negative attitudes towards teaching and learning in mother tongue. The study recommended that relevant education players develop a curriculum which would result in the use of local languages as tools for economic empowerment and help change the attitudes of teachers, learners and parents towards teaching and learning in mother tongue.

**Keywords** Teacher and learner factors, Teaching and learning, Mother tongue, Lower public primary schools, Kenya

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## 1. Introduction

In 1948, the United Nations (UN) declared education a human right (UNESCO, 1995). From 1990 and more so since 2000, the goal of Education For All (EFA) by 2015 triggered many countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) to roll out programmes through constitutional changes to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) for their citizens in line with the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, (UNESCO, 2005). These programmes have remarkably attracted hundreds of children into schools (UNESCO, 2008) in an endeavor not to just fill classrooms with children, but to bring positive social and economic consequences by enabling children to acquire basic competencies in literacy and numeracy so they could gain from and contribute to the future of their societies. The debate on which language to use to provide quality education to the pupils, especially in the early years of education, has gone on for decades in many countries. Mother tongue based

instruction (MTBI) is instruction given in a child's first (home) language (L1). Studies from different parts of the world indicate that MTBI has benefits that enable pupils to achieve more highly than when education is provided in a second language (L2), usually the colonial language or a national language (NL) widely spoken and understood by most of the pupils in that country (Kagure, 2010). However, the implementation of the above policy has been hampered by a several factors (Mulatu, 2014).

Furthermore, for the non-French speakers, mother tongue was taught outside school hours and usually by a teacher of foreign nationality who would have difficulty to make links with other subjects or even to communicate with permanent school staff. While foreign language teaching (FLT) was meant for cognitive, economic, social and cultural reasons, marginalized language teaching (MLT) was meant to be useful when the children eventually returned to their countries of origin and needn't be taught in school. Consequently, teachers developed a negative attitude towards mother tongue and believed that speaking these languages at home delayed the acquisition of French (Helot and Young, 2002). In Kenya there has been and continues to be inter-tribal migration (Benson, 2005). In Senegal, West Africa, Klass, (2008) study showed that pupils who were

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instructed the in home language (L1) performed much better than those who were instructed in French (L2). Oribabor and Adesina, (2013) also in Nigeria found out that instruction in mother tongue aided learning better than English language as a medium of instruction in nursery school.

The study is guided by the Language Acquisition theory of the linguist philosopher and cognitive scientist Chomsky, (1999). According to Chomsky, (1999) children have got inborn structures in the brain he referred to as Language Acquisition Devices (LAD) that give them a natural propensity to organize spoken language in different ways, and argued that children do not simply copy the language that they hear around them, (a view proposed by Skinner, (1997) in his social learning theory in Touretzky and Saksida, (1997) but that they deduce rules from it, which they can then use to produce new sentences. Further Chomsky, (1999) argues there is a universal syntactic set of categories, he called universal grammar (UG) or "language faculty" which children are born with which help them to learn how words and structures of their first language are related to elements of Universal Grammar.

The Language Acquisition theory informed the present study in that if children are not fluent in their mother tongue in oracy and literacy their vocabulary becomes limited, and this restricts their ability to learn a second language and so become illiterate in both mother tongue and the second language. Therefore, a strong foundation in mother tongue is needed for learning the second language, and when teachers and pupils understand this they will be positive towards the use of mother tongue for teaching and learning.

Burton, (2013) indicated that teachers' and parents' views of MTB-MLE focused on the short-term benefits of the policy and the long-term disadvantages. Lefebvre, (2012) revealed that the students did not have an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards the use of mother tongue for instruction; however, their attitudes seemed to fall somewhere between their learned value for multilingualism and their lived experiences. Kiziltan and Atli, (2013) revealed that the pupils had developed positive attitudes towards English language skills and sub skills, materials, the course books, and activities. Further, it was established that the attitudes of the pupils changed significantly according to language skills and learning environment. However, there was no significant difference in the attitudes of pupils towards English according to gender. Chivhanga and Chimhenga, (2014) revealed that the success of using Chishona as a medium of instruction depended on the attitudes and will of the teacher to actually implement it. The study also revealed that the teachers, parents and pupils had negative attitudes towards the use of Chishona as a medium of instruction for mathematics. Ngidi, (2007) revealed that while parents and pupils had a positive attitude towards the use of English as a language of learning and teaching and an additional language in schools, the educators had a negative attitude towards English as a language of learning and teaching and as an additional language in schools. Khenjeri, (2014) revealed that mother tongue was less valued than

English which has instrumental and integrative purposes. Begi, (2014) established that fewer pre-primary school teachers and lower primary school teachers were using mother tongue as a Language of Instruction, while most of pre-primary school and of lower primary school teachers were not using mother tongue as a Language of Instruction.

Kenya introduced FPE in 2003 resulting in an increase in enrollment by over one million (17.6%). The language in Education (LiE) policy in Kenya advocates the use of mother tongue instruction in lower primary classes 1–3. It states in part: "The language of the catchment area (mother tongue) shall be used for child care, pre-primary education and in the education of lower primary children (RoK, 2012). However, this has not been achieved as many schools have continued to use L2 from as early as pre-school, citing a number of factors particularly the large number of languages in Kenya (Benson, 2005). There are over 70 languages and dialects in Kenya which divide Kenyans into regional sub-groups but there is continued inter-regional movement and migration of its people such that one would find children in rural schools who do not speak the language of that community (Benson, 2005). Parents have also put pressure on school managers and teachers to introduce English to their children in these early years of learning. This notwithstanding, English is more commonly used in schools and urban areas. "Sheng", a mixture of English, Swahili and Vernacular is a popular identity marker among the youth but is gaining its way into the larger society (Benson, 2005; and Ogechi, 2005).

The need for this study was informed by the concerns raised by the Kisii Council of Elders which observed that the "Ekegusii language may die out in the next 50 years" (Matundura, 2015). This is because more than half of the community members below 20 years of age do not speak the language while those members living in the diaspora and in towns would rather speak English and Kiswahili. Further, an Education Conference was held at Kisii University in August 2014 with the theme "Africa and the New World Order" which sort to explore ways of providing quality education to the pupils in Kisii County so as to tackle the perennial poor performance by primary school pupils in this region. In monitoring and assessment reports by KNEC, (2010) and UWEZO, (2010; 2011; 2012) already referred to earlier, in which Gucha and Kisii were among the districts surveyed it was found that a vast majority of primary school pupils were not acquiring basic literacy and numeracy competencies and were therefore performing poorly in national examinations – a pointer to the importance of mother tongue as a language of learning in the early years of education of pupils.

## 2. Methodology

The Concurrent Triangulation was adopted to inform the study. The design shows that quantitative and qualitative data were collected at approximately the same time. Quantitative data were collected followed by qualitative data collection. The quantitative data were then analyzed followed by the analysis of qualitative data. The two results

were compared and integrated during the interpretation phase so as to strengthen the understanding of the research questions that were being investigated. The target population comprised of 6000 pupils, 170 teachers, 17 head teachers, and 10 parents out of whom 90 pupils, 9 head teachers, 9 class three teachers, 10 parents and 1 Education Officer were sampled. Saturated sampling technique was used to select the head teachers, the primary schools, and class 3 teachers of lower primary, while simple random sampling was used to select the learners. The validity of instruments was ensured by expert judgment by university lecturers while reliability was ensured by external consistency and a coefficient of  $r = 0.775$ .

### 3. Results & Discussion

In investigating factors affecting the respondents (teachers and head teachers) were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements. Where SA= strongly agree; A= agree; N=neither agree nor disagree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree. The findings are presented in table 1.

The study findings in Table 1 established that several classroom factors affected teaching and learning in mother tongue in lower public primary schools. For instance, the majority of the respondents 11 (61.1%) strongly disagreed with the statement that the school provides adequate materials to teach and learn in mother tongue an indication that these materials were not sufficient for any meaningful

teaching and learning to take place in mother tongue. Slightly less than three quarters of the respondents 13 (72.2%) confirmed that while the existing Language in Education Policy requires the use of the language of the catchment area in lower primary (class 1 – 3), in practice its implementation actually favoured the use of English and Kiswahili or code switching between English and Kiswahili at the expense of mother tongue. Table 1 also demonstrates that most of the teachers were not trained to teach in mother tongue as indicated in table 4.3, 11 (61.1%) of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that they were trained to teach in mother tongue. On whether there were adequate text books written in mother tongue, 10 (55.6%) strongly agreed that there were inadequate textbooks written in indigenous languages, while very few 4 (22.2%) were just positive that there were textbooks written in indigenous languages. Cumulatively, more than three quarters 14 (77.8%) confirmed that there was lack of adequate textbooks and other reading materials written in indigenous languages. Smyth, et al., (2005) concurs that non-Irish children were negatively affected in their learning because they were not taught in their native languages since there were no books written in the native languages of the migrant children. The majority of the respondents 10 (55.6%) also indicated that most of the pupils were not expressing themselves so well in mother tongue owing to interference from foreign languages hence, that could hamper the successful implementation of teaching in mother tongue.

**Table 1.** Teacher factors Affecting Teaching and Learning in Mother Tongue

Statement		SA	A	N	D	SD	Total
The school provides adequate materials to teach and learn in mother tongue	F	00	01	02	04	11	18
	%	0.0	5.6	11.1	22.2	61.1	100
The existing language policy favors foreign languages	F	13	03	00	01	01	18
	%	72.2	16.7	0.0	5.6	5.6	100
I am trained to teach in mother tongue	F	00	00	00	07	11	18
	%	0.0	0.0	0.0	38.9	61.1	100
There is low interactive teaching	F	07	04	02	02	03	18
	%	38.9	22.2	11.1	11.1	16.7	100
There are inadequate textbooks written in indigenous language	F	10	04	03	01	00	18
	%	55.6	22.2	16.7	5.6	00.0	100
The class is not homogeneous in terms of native language spoken	F	11	5	00	02	00	18
	%	61.1	27.8	0.0	11.1	0.0	100
There is high population in class	F	10	06	02	00	00	18
	%	55.56	33.3	11.1	0.0	0.0	100
The level of teacher – pupil personal interaction is low	F	9	04	02	02	01	18
	%	50.0	22.2	11.1	11.1	5.6	100
Pupils express themselves well in mother tongue	F	01	02	02	03	10	18
	%	5.6	11.1	11.1	16.7	55.6	100

That mother tongue is not used significantly for teaching and learning is also supported by the findings of (Begi, 2014) who established that in the Districts of Kisii, Kericho and Bondo in Kenya, fewer than half (44.4%) of pre-primary school teachers and 41.7% lower primary school teachers were using mother tongue in teaching, while the majority (55%) of the pre-primary school and (58.3%) of lower primary school teachers were using English or Kiswahili in teaching and not mother tongue, implying that mother tongue was not regarded highly as a language that could be used for teaching and learning. Smyth *et al.* (2005) also in agreement concluded that language difficulties most commonly contributed to learning difficulties as the non-Irish pupils were not taught in their native languages.

During one of the FGD sessions a teacher remarked: *“Naki ndasomie ekegusii getari gotemwa na bitabu mbiyo?”* (T<sub>2</sub>), (“How can I teach in mother tongue which is not examined and has no textbooks?”). Still on textbooks, one head teacher said: *“In my school there are only a handful of storybooks, there are no books like TKK which used to show how to read and write in mother tongue”* (H/T<sub>5</sub>). Additionally, another teacher remarked: *“Titobwati butabu binde torasomerie ekegusii, naende bana batakoru matemwa nigo togosomia emeremo yende buna chisabu chingaki chie'kegusii”* (T<sub>7</sub>), (We don't have any books we can use to teach in mother tongue, instead we use that time to teach other subjects like mathematics).

This could greatly discourage the usage of mother tongue in teaching and learning in lower primary. This view is supported by Burton (2013) who established that teachers and parents overtly supported the local languages policy in terms of complying with the requirements, yet they were covertly resistance to its use as was observed in their words and actions, thereby showing their preference for English at the expense of Bikol (a local language of in South East Asia). Similarly, Gobana, (2014) also established that one of the challenges hampering mother-tongue education with special reference to Afan Oromo in the Eastern Hararge Zone of Ethiopia was lack of political will and administrative support for the implementation of Afan Oromo as a Medium of Instruction. Benson, (2005) also established that parents put pressure on managers and teachers to introduce English to their children in the early years of learning.

During the interview session with the head teachers, some of the themes that came out were language policy in the school and cosmopolitan nature of the class room. It was established that the existing language policies in the schools mainly favored the usage of English and Kiswahili over the mother tongue, and this was established to affect negatively the usage of mother tongue in learning and teaching. For instance when probed on this, one of the head teachers said:

*“We encourage our pupils to interact in either English or Kiswahili while in school or even outside school as our language policy because these are the official languages through which both internal and national exams are set. To enforce this policy we operate a disc system in which the pupil with the disc at the end of the day is punished.”* (H/T,

5)

This shows that biased language policy in schools towards mother tongue, discouraged its usage even in class room hence made it difficult to be adopted in teaching and learning. This is also supported by Jones, (2012) who established that most of the schools encourage negative attitudes towards application of mother tongue in education, through their unfavorable language policy where a learner is even punished for speaking in mother tongue while in school.

Another finding that was made by the majority of respondents concerned the ethnic composition of the classes whereby it was indicated that the nature of the classrooms was not homogeneous in terms of ethnicity. There were a number of non-native speakers enrolled in the classrooms together with children from the local community. This was attributed to intertribal migration especially following the infamous post-election violence of 2008 when people from other Kenyan communities found it safer to reside in Gusii land. It was thus felt by most of the respondents that this impeded teaching and learning in mother tongue because not all children were able to speak or understand the same native language as the locals, therefore teachers resorted to the use of English for teaching so that the non-natives could not be disadvantaged. During the interviews with one of the head teachers he made the following remarks:

*“Some of our classes compose of different tribes across the country partly because of the post-election violence when some tribal groups moved to Kisii land which was peaceful for all tribes that moved here and so, the teachers of lower will find it difficult to give instruction or disseminate knowledge in mother tongue. Besides, some of our classes have more than 50 pupils each and this limits the interaction between the teacher and learner at personal level hence discouraging the application of mother tongue in teaching”* (H/ T, 2)

It can therefore be deduced that absence of homogeneous classes composing of the same tribe could also prevent teaching and learning in mother tongue. This observation was also supported by Benson, (2005); Begi, (2014) who all agreed that intertribal migration and intermarriage between different tribes render many children unable to speak the language of the catchment area in which they find themselves and this makes it difficult for teachers to adopt the use of mother tongue for teaching as many classes in different parts of Kenya are composed of children from different tribal origins or they are of mixed tribal parentage which would make it difficult to implement the Language in Education Policy effectively.

The study also sought to find out the attitudes of teachers towards teaching in mother tongue. To achieve this, the study first sought to determine the value and use of mother tongue in relation to English and Kiswahili. The value placed on a given language is a pointer to the attitude towards that language and the way that language is used in various settings and situations. The amount of attention given to a particular language is greatly influenced by the value placed on that language. Therefore, to establish the attitudes

teachers held towards mother tongue, the study sought to find out the value they place on it and to establish what value the teachers held towards mother tongue the author sought to find out the languages teachers preferred the learners to use during lessons and the reasons for it. The responses are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Value and Use of Mother Tongue in Relation to English

Language	Frequency	Percentages
Mother tongue	02	11.1
English	10	55.6
Kiswahili	03	16.7
English and Kiswahili	03	16.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As shown in table 2 very few 2 (11.1%) of the teacher respondents preferred their learners to use Mother Tongue during lessons, while the majority 10 (55.6%) preferred their learners to use English instead of mother tongue, 3 16.7% preferred to use Kiswahili and another 3 (16.7%) teachers preferred to code switch between English and Kiswahili than use mother tongue. Therefore, from the findings it can be concluded that most of the teachers preferred their learners to use English and to code switch between English and Kiswahili instead of using mother tongue during instruction. It can also be concluded that Mother Tongue held very little value (16.7%) in comparison to English and Kiswahili (83.3%). Chivhanga and Chimhenga, (2014) similarly established in Zimbabwe that most of the teachers did not like teaching in mother tongue because they believed that the language had little value especially when it came to assessing the learners in exams. Khenjeri, (2014) corroborates these findings by observing that in Hamisi District, Western Kenya mother tongue was less valued as a language of teaching compared to English or Kiswahili which had instrumental and integrative purposes. In contrast, Burton, (2013) and Lefebvre, (2012) did observe that held positive attitudes towards the use of Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction though English was still preferred because it had more advantages in the education systems that used foreign languages. Similarly, Kiziltan and Atli, (2013) found that the attitudes of teacher and pupils changed according to the language skills and learning environment, meaning that if the language skills and environment were right, then the attitudes towards use of Mother Tongue for teaching and learning would be positive.

## 4. Conclusions

The study concluded that; both teachers and learners had negative attitudes towards teaching and learning in mother tongue. The study also concluded that poor attitude of teachers towards mother tongue and preference of foreign languages as a mode of communication, could be attributed to lack of proper training among the teachers and the

unavailability of resources for teaching and learning in mother tongue, while learners' preference for English and Kiswahili could be attributed to their prominence as languages of education and greater communication. The study recommended that, the primary teacher training colleges in Kenya should be empowered to train and in-service teachers in mother tongue skills since they are the ones mandated to produce the bulk of professional teachers for primary schools in Kenya. This is because the study revealed that primary school teachers were not trained the skills of teaching Mother Tongue. Further studies could focus on the Influence of foreign languages on adoption of mother tongue in education.

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