

Effectiveness of the Use of Several Dialects to Instruct Lower Primary School Pupils in Matete Sub-County, Kakamega County, Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of the use of several dialects as languages of instruction in primary schools in Matete Sub-county of Kakamega County in Kenya. The study analysed how the several dialects are used in the teaching and learning process given that many dialects are used interchangeably with many pupils who have not achieved peak mother tongue development being subjected to the dialects at their young age. The findings revealed that many pupils did not effectively benefit from the instruction of teachers who used one of the dialects which was not their own. Similarly, teachers were not comfortable with the requirement that they use a local dialect in teaching. Many of them preferred that they used Swahili or English Languages. This study is significant to Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) and the Ministry of Education (MOE) in formulating policies that could lead to a better relationship between pupils and teachers in lower primary schools in Kenya.

Key words: Dialects, Instruction, Lower primary, Matete, Kakamega, Kenya.

1. Introduction

Kenya is a linguistically heterogeneous country with many indigenous and exogenous languages. Each of the 42 tribes is either a language or has several dialects under it, with up to 18 dialects in some languages.

Kenya did not have a robust language policy in the education sector until about independence. The Beecher Report (1949) proposed the use of 20 mother tongues as languages of instruction between class 1-3 and English in latter schooling apart from Kiswahili. This proposal soon met difficulties of choosing 20 languages out of the over 100 languages without appearing to favour one. More so, lack of proficient professionals and instructional materials to facilitate the learning process cropped up.

Later, the Ominde Commission (1964) came with recommendations that English language should be taught from class 1 to equip pupils with communicative competencies. It also ridiculed the Beecher report for recommending the use of mother tongue, saying it is ill-equipped and ill-adapted for use in instruction. This commission however recommended the use of mother tongue in story-telling sessions from class 1-3. The Gachathi Commission (1976) agreed with the Beecher report that mother tongue should be used to instruct pupils between class 1-3 and English from class 4 onwards except for Kiswahili. The Kenya constitution (2010) came with a raft of changes to the education language policy. Chapter 2 article 7 provided the following:

- i. Both English and Swahili are national and official languages. This was different from the past where English was official and Swahili national.
- ii. The state was required to legislate laws that would protect and promote the use and diversity of indigenous languages
- iii. All official and constitutional documents of the state were to be in both English and Swahili.

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As a result of the above, many communities are presented with the challenge of the dialect of choice in instruction between classes 1-3. Matete District has a bigger challenge due to the numerous dialects that are used in the same area. The District has Nyala, Kabras, Bukusu and Tachoni dialects operating in the same environment

The Luhya community has 16 dialects (sometimes said to be 18 if Suba and Banyala of Busia are added) which vary in vocabulary, structure and many times meanings of words. A word from one dialect may not be understood in another or it may even have a quite different (or even worse, opposite) meaning. Matete District is a rather complex area demographically and ethnically. It lies on the lower western end of the Lugari settlement scheme where many ethnic groups in Kenya settled. This explains why Matete has several Luhya dialects speakers and among the speakers are the teachers and pupils of lower primary schools. The four dialects of study were: Bukusu, Kabras, Nyala and Tachoni. These dialects are all rich in culture. Although Webb and Kembo (2000) advocate that L1 is necessary to preserve cultural identity, these numerous dialects affect the learning of concepts in English given their dominance in the learning environment.

Objectives

The study objectives were: to find out the effectiveness of the use of several dialects in the teaching and learning process and whether the learners benefit from the learning process like they would if it were done in Swahili or English Languages.

2. Literature review

Multilingualism and Multi-dialecticism

Multilingualism is the act of using polyglotism, or using multiple languages either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers. Multilingualism has become a social phenomenon governed by the needs of globalization and cultural openness. A multilingual set up can either be polyglossic, omnilingual or multipart-lingual. As it was stated earlier, Matete District is omnilingual: It is nearly impossible to predict which language will be used in a given setting due to the many languages (Winch, 1990). Multidialecticism refers to a state where various dialects exist side-by-side in a communication. This enables communication adjustment and leveling by the conversational partners. With many dialects among the speakers of Matete District, the challenge of communication shifted to the classroom interaction. It is even more difficult with the realization that some speakers among the 16 Luhya dialects may not understand some language construction from other dialects. For example, the Luhya community embraces peace, communicated through a handshake. The words assigned to the action of a handshake (greeting) are diverse: Mulembe, Ochie, Wusieye, Wirire, Ori, Oli mwoyo, Munomuno, Ovendi, Ove mlamu etc. all these words when availed for classroom interaction at lower primary level may cause many challenges to the young learners.

The power of language to reflect culture and influence thinking was first proposed by an American linguist and anthropologist, Edward Sapir (1884–1939), and his student, Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941). The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis stated that the way we think and view the world is determined by our language (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2002; Crystal, 1987; Hayes, Ornstein, & Gage, 1987). Instances of cultural language differences are evidenced in that some languages have specific words for concepts whereas other languages use several words to represent a specific concept. For example, the Arabic language includes many specific words for designating a certain type of horse or camel (Crystal, 1987). To make such distinctions in English, where specific words do not exist, adjectives would be used preceding the concept label, such as quarter horse or dray horse.

Cultural differences have also been noted in the ways in which language is used pragmatically. For instance, in American culture, new skills are typically taught and learned through verbal instruction (Slobin, 1979). In some cultures, new skills are learned through nonverbal observation. A distinction has also been made between cultures that encourage independent learning and those that encourage cooperative learning

(McLeod, 1994). Because culture and language go together, this study intended to find out if the various dialects (and therefore culture) affect beneficial learning among pupils of class 1-3.

Differences in the social roles of adults and children also influence how language is used. Home and school contexts may represent different cultures, subcultures, or both and may influence language acquisition in noticeable ways. Nonverbal cues (e.g. facial expression) and contextual cues (e.g. shared experience) have different communicative roles in different cultures (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003). In some cultures, prelinguistic children (who are not yet verbalizing) are spoken about rather than spoken to (Heath, 1983). Children may be expected, and thus taught, to speak only when an adult addresses them. They are not encouraged to initiate conversations with adults or to join spontaneously in ongoing adult conversations. Additionally, in some cultures, children who enthusiastically volunteer answers at school are considered show-offs (Peregoy & Boyle, 1993). In some cultural settings, children are not asked recitational questions. Instead, they are asked only questions of clarification or for new information. Thus, when these children experience recitational questions in a school setting, they may be confused as to the purpose of the questioning and the expected response.

Further cultural differences in how language is used in educational settings have been documented by Tharp (1994). These differences include variations in how stories are told, the wait time given by teachers to students during questioning sequences, the rhythmic patterns of the verbal interactions, and the patterns of conversational turn-taking. During the 1970s and 1980s, educators and linguists researched and debated the verbal-deficit perspective. This perspective contended that anyone who did not use standard English did not have a valid language and thus was verbally deficient. Although the verbal-deficit perspective has now been proven invalid, it is important to understand the research that was conducted to either support or discredit that perspective. Bernstein (1971), Bereiter and Englemann (1966), and Labov (1979) were among the researchers who studied language differences between different social groups, including middle- and lower-income groups and ethnic groups. This body of research identified specific differences in the way children from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds used language in school and out-of-school settings. Implications of this research have been widely discussed and interpreted in a variety of ways.

Basil Bernstein, (1971) documented the different linguistic codes used by children from lower and middle-income families in England. Lower-income children were described as using a “restricted code” or highly contextualized language, while children from middle-income families used an “elaborated code,” or decontextualized language. His research also documented differences in school achievement for these two groups of children. Interpretations of Bernstein’s work concluded a cause-effect relation between language use and school success, supporting a “verbal deficit” perspective: the working-class environment of the low-income children created a verbal deficiency responsible for subsequent low educational achievement (Winch, 1990).

In the United States, Bereiter and Englemann (1966) conducted further research from the verbal-deficit perspective. They focused on the language of preschool African-American children in Urbana, Illinois. Bereiter and Engleman concluded that the language used by African American children was not a valid language and thus recommended that these children needed to be taught English in the school setting (Winch, 1990). Academically oriented pre-school curricula were developed (Blank, Rose, & Berlin, 1978) to provide the needed English language training for verbally deficient children.

The importance of family context in language acquisition was more recently described by Hart and Risley (1995, 1999). Findings from their longitudinal study document the significance of “talkativeness” in families in influencing language acquisition rather than the family’s socioeconomic status or ethnic group identity, they state that differences in language use were attributed to the complex family culture-not simply due to socioeconomic status or ethnic group identity. Among the families that were studied, the most important difference was in the amount of talking. Children in families where there was more talking developed higher levels of language in the areas of vocabulary growth and vocabulary use. These differences were strongly linked to school performance at age 9.

Among these families, Hart and Risley (1995) identified five quality features in parents' language interactions with their children:

- (i) Language diversity: the variation and amount of nouns and modifiers used by the parents
- (ii) Feedback tone: the positive feedback given to children's participation in the interaction
- (iii) Symbolic emphasis: the emphasis placed on focusing on names and associated relations of the concepts and the recall of those symbols
- (iv) Guidance style: parental interaction that used asking rather than demanding in eliciting specific behavior from the child
- (v) Responsiveness: parental responsiveness to requests or questions initiated by children

Hart and Risley (1995) speculated that these categories may be "important for the language-based analytic and symbolic competencies upon which advanced education and a global economy depend" (p. 193). A current hypothesis on why children from diverse linguistic backgrounds experience difficulty in school is the socialization mismatch hypothesis. This hypothesis predicts that children are more likely to succeed in school when the home language and literacy socialization patterns are similar to those that are used and valued in school (Faltis, 1998, p. 23). This hypothesis has been applied to children who speak a nonstandard English dialect as well as to children who are learning a second language. Home language socialization patterns may differ from those favored in the school classroom in the following ways (Faltis, 1998):

- (i) The amount of talk directed to pre-school children
- (ii) The participation of young children as conversation partners with adults
- (iii) Opportunities children have to explain or give a personal interpretation of events.
- (iv) The types of questions asked of children during storybook sharing
- (vi) The forms of narrative that are used (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, or ongoing narratives).

In addition, the social interaction patterns used in the classroom may vary from the home cultures with respect to expectations for competitive versus collaborative or cooperative activities as well as the "courtesies and conventions of conversations" (Tharp, 1994, p. 140). This study therefore seeks to establish whether the varying of a language or dialect can affect the learner's ability to acquire English.

The Luhya Community Language Situation

Many Luhya sub-tribes speak several related dialects while few don't. As a way of showing this distance, the Bukusu people are ethnically Luhya but the Bukusu dialect is said by anthropologists to be a variety of the Masaba (Abagisu) people. Luhyas are a Bantu ethnic group in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. They are about 6.1 million, about 16% of Kenya's population. There are about 16 (and by other accounts 17 when the Suba are included) tribes that make up the Luhya, each having a distinct dialect. The 16 are notably; bukusu, Idakho, Isukha, Kabras, Khayo, Kisa, Maragoli, Marachi, Marama, Nyala, Nyole, Samia, Tachoni, Tiriki, Tsotso and Wanga.

Comparison of words in five Luhya dialects and English

| English | Kisa | Logoli | Nyole | Wanga | Nyala |
|---------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| I, Me | Eshie | Nzi, Inze | Ise | Esie | Ese |
| Words | Amakhuwa | Makuva | Amang'ana | Amakhuwa | Amakhuwa |
| Chair | Eshifumbi | Indeve | Indebe | Eshisala | Esisala |
| Head | Omurwe | Mutwi | Omurwe | Om'rwe | Omuchwe |
| Money | Amapesa | Mang'ondo | Amang'ondo | Amapesa, Irupia | Esende, Amang'ondo |

Source: Author

Wangia (2009) delves into comparison of language by discussing translation between dialects. He says that any effective translation is measured on how well the source language is captured in the target language. Wangia says this in reference to the literal translation of the English bible into Lulogooli language. On the

other hand, Okombo (1994) argues that there is no way a translation could share the same systematic space, structure or completely perform exactly the same functions as the original text.

Angongo (1980) extensively accounts for the languages under the luhya community. In her study, the Lulogooli and Lwitakho are treated as dialects of the luhya language because of the many salient linguistic features. A few differences are also noted.

These views were considered by the researcher because the dialects under study in this research involve change of lexical words if mapped on another dialect. This study hopefully took this topic to another level by examining a rather rare situation of four dialects co-existing in a school set up to the extent where the language/dialect to be used in instruction is neither clear nor defined. The dialects are Lunyala, Lubukusu, Lutachoni and Lukabras. Additionally, this study would be an important addition to the information on Luhya dialects and its effects on learning in lower primary pupils and comparative linguistics in general.

Language Acquisition in Children: The Context of Multilingualism

Chomsky (1978, 1988), says that every child is formed (and born) with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) in its head. This is the Faculty that is triggered when a child receives significant amounts of comprehensible inputs. Chomsky therefore espouses that language acquisition is guided by an innate procedure. For children, it is a universal feat. Children have strong inductive biases to acquire a language unlike adults. This ability reduces with increase in age up to around puberty (Wanner and Gleitman, 1982:12f) Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is used to refer to any language acquisition other than the first language irrespective of the type of learning environment and the number of other non-native languages known by the learner (Sharwood Smith, 1994:7.) This means that any language acquired after the native Language becomes the referent in SLA. One may not clearly explain the beginning of SLA as it is a relatively new field. SLA is however the acquisition of a non-primary language; that is, the acquisition of a language beyond the native language.

Given that multilingualism and multi-dialecticism may involve code switching, Adendorff (1993) reached some conclusions of code switching in teacher education in South Africa. He says, in order to understand the role of code switching as an interactive communicative resource in a multicultural society, there is a need for 'Consciousness raising' among teachers. Consciousness raising here means disabusing the notion of code switching being dysfunctional and a show of ignorance. It also means not advocating for a purist use of language. We should therefore celebrate multilingualism and multi dialecticism as rich communicative resources. Ncoko et al (2000:239) focus on implications of having 11 official languages in South Africa's education environment where the interconnectedness of language, similar to code switching was recognized.

In this study, a careful examination of the impact of the four dialects in the studying of the lower primary pupils' learning was done to establish if any patterns can come out to explain any linguistic theory.

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design. Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used. A sample population was observed and responses noted down: Qualitative techniques were used to gauge the attitudinal concerns of both teachers and students. On the other hand, quantitative methods were used to quantify observable traits.

The teachers involved in the study were purposively sampled. Three teachers were sampled from each of the 4 zones, a total of 12 teachers participated in the study. Only those who taught language or reading were sampled. Three streams were randomly selected from each of the 4 zones. A total of 12 classes were selected from Matete Sub-county.

The quality of any research is influenced by the appropriateness of methodology, instrumentation and suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted (Manion et al., 2001). An ideal sample should be large enough to assure a researcher that a different sample of the same size, drawn using same procedures,

can give approximately similar results (Wiersman, 1995). Cluster sampling was applied to cluster the schools as follows: Central zone, northern zone, eastern zone and western zone. In each cluster, two schools were selected using simple random sampling technique. Each school had three streams of class 1-3 under study. In total, eight schools were selected for the study. In each of the 4 zones identified, 3 teachers were selected to participate in the study.

Purposive sampling was used to select teachers who teach language and are exposed to the effects of multi-dialecticism. The researcher deliberately sought the first respondents with knowledge in the subject area related to the study. The sample size comprised 12 teachers: 3 teachers were drawn from each of the 4 zones sampled from Matete District. It also included 3 streams of pupils from each of the 4 zones. The total sample size thus comprised 12 streams (pupils) and 12 teachers.

Study Population

| Schools | Number of Streams | Population of Teachers |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Eastern zone (1 school) | 3 Streams | 3 |
| 2. Western zone (1 school) | 3 Streams | 3 |
| 3. Central zone (1 school) | 3 Streams | 3 |
| 4. Northern zone (1 school) | 3 Streams | 3 |
| 5. Grand Total | 12 streams | 12 |

4. Findings and Discussions

Dialects Preferred by Teachers

Apart from Tachoni, majority of the teachers preferred to teach in English and Kiswahili. Those who teach in the various dialects were as below.

Dialects/Language Used by Teachers in Teaching

| Dialect/language | Number of teachers | Out of |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Tachoni | 5 | 12 |
| Bukusu | 1 | 12 |
| Swahili | 3 | 12 |
| English | 1 | 12 |
| Kabras | 2 | 12 |
| Nyala | 0 | 12 |

This study had sought to find out which dialect was preferred for use by the teachers while teaching and why this was so. The Tachoni language had the highest number of teachers who taught in that dialect.

When asked about the reasons for using Tachoni language, various responses were received:

- i.** Tachoni dialect is the predominant language in the area
- ii.** Tachoni dialect shares language features and vocabulary with two other languages in the area, namely Kabras and Bukusu.
- iii.** Tachoni language has been generally accepted to the extent that some students use it when it is not their L1
- iv.** Some pupils in lower classes have not effectively learnt Kiswahili or English to warrant the use of those languages.

From these responses, Tachoni dialect was the most used in teaching pupils. The reason for this was that the area was predominantly occupied by the Tachoni speaking dialect.

A dialect that is used most would automatically appear to enjoy a better status than others. Wolf (2002:14) observed that for a language to be considered as developed, it must have viable orthography, substantial literature and be used in domains of education, broadcasting, print media, administration and law. In the Eastern zone, Tachoni dialect was predominantly used in teaching. This was especially so in classes one and two.

Dialects and Effective Communication in Class

This study sought to know if teachers felt satisfied that the use of any of the dialects was effectively communicating with all learners in class. The teachers' responses showed that even as the teachers used the dialects, they were very much aware that they may not be communicating effectively with all learners.

In fact, all the teachers interviewed categorically said that they were aware some pupils were not being effectively communicated to. When asked about the reasons for the lack of communication, 10 out of 12 teachers said pupils who did not share a dialect with their teacher were most likely not to understand the language and were said to miss out on many vocabulary words because of lack of exposure to such words. This therefore meant that such students did not benefit from the learning process in class.

This study also sought to find out if teachers found any difficulties in communicating with learners who speak dialects other than their own. All the teachers who participated in the study affirmed that there was. They insisted that their students did not fully understand the other dialects especially if the dialect is spoken with elevated vocabulary, leading to lack of effective communication.

One of the teachers in a school in the Eastern zone gave this study a rare challenge. The teacher was not originating from any of the four Luhya dialects. She was a Kamba speaker from Machakos who got married to a Tachoniman ten years ago. She had since struggled to understand the Tachoni dialect. She got surprises with new vocabulary from pupils occasionally, forcing her to consult the indigenous teachers for meaning. While teaching about shapes, one pupil referred to the star shape as "Ining'i ning'i" which was a surprise equivalent word for "Ing'eniesi", meaning the star.

This posed a great challenge to her, greater than all other teachers, because of her native language which was non Luhya.

The study affirms that there are verbal deficiencies between the various dialects as a result of the verbal differences. The study also found out that where a Luhya dialect is used, it was not used exclusively. Other dialects are occasionally used to fill gaps which may arise in the course of the communication. This therefore suggests that no single Luhya dialect can claim to be developed enough to offer linguistic demands like any other mature languages.

Tough's (1977) study studied advantaged and disadvantaged children and concluded that children from different cultural environments use language differently and experience difficulties in participating in a different language conversation. This explains why learners have difficulties answering questions in class and in the passing of exams set in a dialect other than their own.

Hart and Risley, (1995,1999), also discuss language with reference to the family. Looking at a classroom as a family, they say that 'talkativeness' influences language acquisition, use and development of competency. "Talkativeness" is used to mean the consistent use of the dialect or dialects in the speaker's environment. Hart and Risley say the numerous dialects in our language environment inhibit 'talkativeness' thus negatively affecting fluency. This is the case in Matete District especially in the Eastern, Northern and Central zones where the four dialects are largely used interchangeably, making fluency in one particular language hard to be achieved.

5. Conclusion

This research concludes that Matete district has no single dialect used in instructing pupils in class. The dialects differ from zone to zone, depending on the dialect of the individual teachers and majority of the

learners in the schools. For instance, the Eastern zone had majority of teachers used Tachoni dialect even when all the pupils in their classes did not speak Tachoni-some spoke Nyala, Kabras and Bukusu. One teacher in the Eastern zone was of Kamba origin, a language in Eastern province in Kenya. Having hardly mastered Tachoni dialect, the teacher relied on fellow teachers for interpretation of words considered mundane for her.

Schools in the western zone preferred to use Kabras dialect because majority of the teachers and pupils were of that dialect. The central zone used English and Kiswahili languages in teaching because the zone was cosmopolitan. The Northern zone used Tachoni and Bukusu dialects interchangeably. This in effect caused confusion and lack of learning among pupils who do not speak the dialect being used.

Tachoni dialect had the highest number of teachers who used it to instruct pupils with 42% of the teachers sampled speaking Tachoni. In effect, the minority pupils from any other dialect would miss out on the instruction content or find it hard to infer, understand and benefit from the learning process.

Switching between dialects was found to be used in the district. Just like code switching, dialect switching was widely used, especially the switching between Tachoni, Kabras, English and Swahili. The dialect switching was mostly done at various levels of the lesson. Lesson introduction and conclusion received the highest number of dialect switching.

Using Luhya dialects to instruct pupils is facing many serious challenges, perhaps bigger than earlier thought. One teacher from the Eastern zone who speaks Kamba as her vernacular had difficulties teaching in Tachoni dialect which was dominant yet the teacher merely understood basic words and greetings. She opted to use Swahili and English with heavy reliance on staff mates to interpret the vernacular vocabulary that she met in class.

6. Recommendations

This research recommends that English and Kiswahili should be the only languages of instruction and interaction in schools. Kiswahili should be used to teach Kiswahili subject and English to teach English and other subjects. This is because none of the four dialects under study has the capacity to be used as a language of instruction.

The government should assist the district in subjecting the dialects to the process of language standardization if the dialects should continue being used in instructing pupils. Through dialect standardization, any of the four dialects found acceptable to all speakers will be developed and effective sensitization done to achieve uniformity. This will eventually help to improve results in all subjects and especially languages.

The government through the Sub-county Education Board should head-hunt qualified scholars who should write and publish book bearing relevant content in Luhya dialects so that the books can be used in instructing pupils. This is as a result of the sad fact that none of the dialects in Matete District had books published in them. Books were found from a far-off dialect, Wanga.

Finally, Setting of exams should also be done in two languages, English and Kiswahili. English should be used to set exams in all subjects apart from Kiswahili. This recommendation is in line with my earlier recommendation that English and Kiswahili be used as languages of instruction in schools. If this is done, it will ensure that some children are not linguistically disadvantaged during teaching and examining.

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