



# Kenya

**The impact of language policy  
and practice on children's learning:  
Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa  
2016**

## 2.7. Kenya

### 2.7.1. Background information

After several decades as a British colony, Kenya gained its independence in 1963. English remains the dominant language in Kenyan politics and commerce. Kembo-Sure and Ogechi (2009, p. 151) note that the colonial history of Kenya established English “as the most revered, powerful and ‘prestigious’ language,” while the mother tongues were to be used “for mundane communicative needs” in the private sphere. Kembo-Sure and Ogechi argue that the “independent language policy in education firmly entrenched the old colonial pattern to the extent that the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction and taught as a subject for only three years of an individual’s school career (ironically shorter than the four years the colonists gave it).”

Ethnologue lists 68 languages for Kenya.

### 2.7.2. Current language policy

National language policy mandates use of the language of the catchment area as the medium of instruction in Grades 1 to 3 (Nyatuka, 2014); in practice, however, English is used extensively as the medium of instruction even in Grade 1 classrooms (Trudell and Piper, 2014; Bunyi, 2013; Muthwii, 2002). English and Swahili are supposed to be taught in these schools as subjects; but as Ruto observes, “[m]ost formal schools flout this [policy] and start with English as the medium or mix three languages” (Ruto, 2004, p. 126).

Discussing this pro-English classroom practice, Trudell (2007) observes that “post-independence governments’ education choices have mirrored their own agendas of national unity and stability, including the maintained use of European colonial languages as languages of instruction” (p. 554). Trudell argues that for these countries, including Kenya, the national education agendas are motivated by economic progress and social advantage.

Speakers of Kenya’s non-dominant languages also have strong reasons to value English. Access to formal education is particularly important to members of culturally marginalized communities, who must master dominant forms of cultural practice - including the language - if they are to gain access to mainstream political and economic institutions. Since language is a major component of such access, fluency in the colonial language is highly valued (Trudell, 2007).

As a result, even national policy that supports local language use as a medium of instruction is often appropriated in ways that nullify the intended pedagogical and cultural impact of the policy. The economic and logistical challenges to implementing such policies are relatively minor compared to the huge challenge posed by a widespread language ideology that rules out African language use in the classroom in favour of an international language, which the students rarely speak (Trudell and Piper, 2014, p. 10).

### 2.7.3. Education policy and practice

The mismatch between pro-mother tongue education policy and pro-international language classroom practice, so common across Africa, is particularly well documented in Kenya. Dubeck, Jukes and Okello (2012, p. 51) explain it this way:

“Although the language of instruction policy appears to be clear, practical implementation is less straightforward. A lack of instructional materials in the mother tongue, and a concern that students who do not begin instruction in English upon school entry will be disadvantaged when they take exit exams, combine to increase the use of English in the early primary grades.”

The sociolinguistic context, however, in which 75 per cent of the population have some varying degree of Swahili fluency and only 15 per cent speak English fluently (Bunyi 2008), demonstrates clearly that these practices do not produce successful learning among the majority of Kenyan children.

#### 2.7.4. Studies

In their study of language use in primary classrooms, Kembo-Sure and Ogechi (2009) document the failure of the prevailing English-focused ideology to facilitate learning in science and mathematics. Even in schools where the local language was supposedly the medium of instruction through Grade 3, English was used heavily in these in the early grades. The authors argue that the transition from mother tongue medium to English medium is premature; it denies children the opportunity to develop cognitive and intellectual skills in their first language, which they can later transfer to English.

Dubeck et al (2012) carried out a qualitative study of literacy instruction in 24 lower primary classrooms in coastal Kenya. The languages of instruction were Swahili and English, even though neither of these languages adequately served the pupils in communicating (Dubeck et al, 2012, pp. 61-62). Even though teachers were aware of the national policy promoting the mother tongue, local languages were not recognized as languages of instruction; this was partly because of the linguistic heterogeneity in some of the classrooms, and partly because the teachers themselves often did not speak the local language. A lack of materials in the mother tongue was another hindrance to using those languages.

Between the two sanctioned languages of instruction, Swahili and English, English was the preferred medium of instruction, although teachers reported that their students generally read better and participated more in Swahili than in English (*ibid.*, p. 63).

Graham and Van Ginkel (2014) carried out a quantitative study on the extent to which the words per minute (WPM) reading benchmark is appropriate in languages other than English, the language in which the benchmark was originally developed. WPM and comprehension testing of 300 children from two Kenyan

language communities, Sabaot and Pokomo, as well as English-speaking children in Britain and Dutch-speaking children in the Netherlands, indicated that similar comprehension scores occurred among diverse WPM rates. Graham and Van Ginkel argue that the WPM benchmark is not a reliable comparative measure of reading development, since linguistic and orthographic features can differ considerably and are likely to influence the reading acquisition process.

#### 2.7.5. Language education initiatives

##### **Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL)**

The Kenyan NGO, Bible Translation and Literacy Kenya (BTL), has been involved in the implementation of pilot mother tongue-medium education (MTE) projects in various language communities of Kenya; these include Sabaot (Jones, 2013; Jones and Barkhuizen, 2011), Tharaka (Nyaga, 2005; Schroeder, 2004), and Pokomo (Graham, 2010) as well as Giriyama, Digo, Duruma and others. These pilot programmes are carried out in collaboration with the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development and local Ministry of Education offices. In designing and implementing these programmes, BTL's focus is on developing and testing effective reading and writing instructional materials, training teachers, and providing proof of concept for the effectiveness of MTE as a means of raising academic achievement among Kenya's numerically smaller language communities.

##### **Primary Mathematics and Reading (PRIMR) Initiative**

PRIMR was carried out by RTI in partnership with Kenya's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), funded by USAID and DFID (Piper, Zuilkowski and Mugenda, 2014). The programme's primary component focused on reading in English and Swahili, as well as mathematics, in Grade 1 and 2 classrooms of 400+ schools. PRIMR involved the development and implementation of reading and writing instructional materials in

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English and Swahili, interventions including teacher support, the use of technology in the classroom and the quantitative assessment of their effectiveness. An additional component of PRIMR focused on the Bukusu and Kamba language communities, with materials development in those languages and building teacher capacity to use those materials for teaching reading and writing in local schools.

### Tusome Early Grade Reading Activity

Following on from the PRIMR initiative, the USAID-funded Tusome Early Grade Reading Activity project began in 2015. The four-year project, carried out by RTI in partnership with Kenya's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), aims to improve early grade reading outcomes in English and kiSwahili, in classrooms across the nation.<sup>20</sup>

### MLE Network

The MLE Network of Kenya (MLEN) was initiated in 2008; its goal is to influence classroom practice in language of instruction through advocacy and research. The Network traces its beginnings to a research seminar on language and education in 2006, hosted by BTL Kenya and SIL Africa and funded partly by the Commonwealth Education Fund. Two years later, the network was formally

established. Its membership today includes representatives of national government education bodies, international and national NGOs, intergovernmental organizations and universities (Trudell, 2014, p. 7).

### Other mother tongue-based projects in Kenya

Mother tongue-based pilot projects are operating in various other language communities of Kenya. They include:

- a supplementary materials development initiative in the Kamba-speaking area. This is part of a Literacy Boost programme carried out among partners, World Vision, Save the Children and SIL;
- two projects among the Maasai of southern Kenya: a classroom-based reading instruction carried out by Women Educational Researchers of Kenya, and a supplementary materials development project by CODE and the National Book Development Council of Kenya;
- a now-ended reading project in the Bukusu language, carried out by CODE and the National Book Development Council of Kenya;
- a bilingual education project in the Borana language of Marsabit Central district, carried out by Concern Worldwide and SIL Africa.

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20 <https://www.rti.org/page.cfm?obj=883001B0-E495-4EDD-9C5A1DD7892410D8>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.