Tanzania

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

2016
2.18. Tanzania, United Republic of

2.18.1. Background information

The United Republic of Tanzania was formed when Tanganyika and the Zanzibar Archipelago merged to form one nation in 1964. Prior to that, the two countries had been colonized by Portugal, Germany, and Britain. Tanganyika achieved independence in 1961, and Zanzibar in 1963, shortly before the two merged to form present-day Tanzania.

Early in the history of the nation, kiSwahili was designated as an official language of Tanzania by President Julius Nyerere as part of his Ujamaa social policy. Currently, English and kiSwahili are the official languages of the country. KiSwahili is used in government, and as the medium of instruction in primary school; English is the language of diplomacy and also the medium of instruction in secondary and post-secondary education.

Ethnologue lists 125 languages for Tanzania.

2.18.2. Current language policy

The use of kiSwahili and English as languages of instruction in the education system has been a point of much debate over the years. Roy-Campbell and Qorro (1997) describe the surprisingly central role of English in education:

“With Kiswahili as the essential language of government and the language of primary schools, the majority of the Tanzanian population has very little use for English. Yet English, used by 5 per cent of the population, continues to be retained as the most important vehicle of instruction in formal educational institutions.” (p. 4)

Vuzo (2014) also questions the effectiveness of this policy, arguing that there is “overwhelming evidence that effective teaching and learning is not taking place” (p. 4).

In February 2015, the Government of Tanzania launched a new education system that abolishes national examinations for primary school leavers and extends the basic education system in Swahili to include four years of secondary school.69 This means that Swahili has become the official medium of instruction from primary school to tertiary level education.

2.18.3. Education policy and practice

Two sets of language issues characterize education in Tanzania today: the tension between use of kiSwahili and English is one of them. As noted above, the policy in Tanzania is to use kiSwahili as the language of instruction in primary grades and English in higher grades.

Controversy continues nationwide, however, over which of the two languages is appropriate and at what grade levels (Mohamed and Banda, 2008). The belief that the entire system should move to English clashes with equally strong commitment to the spread of kiSwahili in secondary school. The issue is debated among the population, in the media, and in government as well, and international, national and local factors come into prominent play (Trudell, 2012, p. 11). Anangisye and Fussy (2014, p. 382) note the existence of primary schools that use English as a language of instruction for all subjects except kiSwahili lessons. The February 2015 announcement of kiSwahili medium education through primary and secondary grades is the most recent move in this debate.

The second set of language issues relates to the role of the many indigenous languages in Tanzania. Recognition is slowly growing that certain segments of the population are poorly-served by the current language-in-education policy and practices. Up to 15 per cent of the population do not speak either kiSwahili or English (Rubagumya, 2007) and the percentage of non-speakers of these two languages is much higher among primary-aged children in non-urban communities.

Tanzania has long been committed as a nation to kiSwahili as the national language, notwithstanding the fact that more than 120 languages are spoken in the country (Mosha 2012: 11). Yet language communities where kiSwahili is not fluently spoken, and certainly not by small children, remain marginalized in the backwater of political, economic and educational progress.

This second language debate in Tanzania receives relatively little attention from policy makers. However researcher Åsa Wedin describes the impact of the language policy on Tanzanians who speak neither English nor kiSwahili: “The policy of today appears effective in building an elite enclosure of English speakers and a lower middle class of Swahili speakers and marginalizing the rest of the population. It also effectively devalues local languages” (Wedin, 2005, p. 571).

2.18.4. Studies

A significant study of language and learning, called *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa* (LOITASA), was undertaken from 2002-2011, with funding from the Norwegian University Fund. In Tanzania, the research was carried out through the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Oslo; its focus was a comparison of learning in Swahili medium classrooms and English medium classrooms. Additional components of LOITASA involved staff development and teacher capacity building. LOITASA has been extensively documented.

Mwinsheikhe (2002) carried out a study of the extent to which Kiswahili is used by both students and teachers in the teaching of science in Tanzanian secondary schools, where English is officially the language of instruction. The majority of the teachers interviewed in the study acknowledged the existence of a language problem in the teaching and learning of science at the secondary level, and admitted that they used Kiswahili regularly to ensure that the students understood the material.

In a collaboration between several universities including the University of Dar es Salaam, the DfID-funded research consortium *Edqual* carried out a *Language and Literacy* research project in Ghana and Tanzania from 2005-2010. The study in Tanzania compared learning outcomes in “L2” (English) and “L1” (kiSwahili). At the *Edqual Tanzania* dissemination event in 2010, researchers commented to this author that, despite the assumptions made in the project, it is acknowledged in the country that kiSwahili is not actually the L1 for many Tanzanian primary school children.

Wedin (2005) reports on a three-year study she undertook in north western Tanzania, in the Runyambo-speaking community of Karagwe. Wedin observes that language ideologies in schools favour the small minority of children raised in an environment where kiSwahili is spoken, such as urban middle-class contexts, while schooling for the great majority implies drastic changes in language use.

“...The stigmatization of Runyambo becomes more evident when we see teachers’ overestimation of their own use of Swahili and of pupils’ proficiency in Swahili... However, pupils who, at least in the lower classes, do not master Swahili, do not have access to a language to express themselves at all.” (Wedin, 2005, p.579)

Wedin argues that the classroom practices in this community constitute a denial of the children’s right to use their own language for learning. Official curricula in Tanzania presume pupils’ knowledge of kiSwahili as a first language. “Although nearly all pupils in primary schools in Karagwe have Swahili as a

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second language, teachers have no guidance in how to teach Swahili as a second language to children, except for the explicit rule of ‘Swahili only’ in school, which implicitly concerns only pupils in Karagwe” (p. 582).

2.18.5. Language education initiatives

Early Grade Reading
Creative Associates and the Tanzanian and Zanzibari Ministries of Education and Vocational Training are engaged in a five-year, USAID-supported project (2009 to 2014) to improve early grade reading outcomes in Swahili, in Zanzibar and Mtwara. The USAID programme fact sheet notes that a national-level early grade reading assessment carried out in 2013 found that only 8 per cent of Grade 2 pupils were able to read with grade-level comprehension (USAID Tanzania, 2009).

Reading and Writing Instruction
Implementation of the Reading and Writing Instruction programme by Room to Read in Tanzania began in 2012, in partnership with Aga Khan University’s Institute for Educational Development (East Africa). The programme focuses on teacher capacity building and the establishment of school libraries.

Children’s Book Project for Tanzania (CBP)
This charity was founded in 1991, with the goal of “developing a strong reading culture and societal appreciation and support for literacy” in Tanzania. Supported by the Canadian NGO, CODE International, CBP provides reading materials and carries out teacher capacity building.

READ International
The British NGO READ International, begun in 2004, provides libraries and English-language books to Tanzanian secondary schools. As of 2014, READ International has donated 1.3 million books and created 56 libraries in secondary schools.