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## THE DOUBLE EDGED ROLE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE OF THE LOWER PRIMARY CLASSROOM IN KENYAN SCHOOLS

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### ABSTRACT

Language plays a crucial role in the education outcomes of a country. The study has addressed the issue of language choice and development in a multilingual state to enable learners be advantaged both locally and internationally. Despite choice of mother tongue and English as medium of instruction in lower primary and from upper primary classes respectively, low literacy level is evident as 1 out of 6 children could not read an English word (Uwezo, 2014). Further, learners' poor command of the English language is evident in poor performance in national exams. Some stakeholders attribute this to use of indigenous languages in school despite their importance in language development. Consequently, there is need to interrogate the place of local languages during instruction at the lower primary level. Purposive sampling techniques were used to select schools where learners used Kiswahili – their indigenous language - as a medium of instruction. Data collection was through observation during English lesson and interviews. The study found that circumstances necessitated the use of Kiswahili language by teachers though they are often discouraged; secondly, the use of Kiswahili enhanced English vocabulary learning as learners performed well on words explained in Kiswahili; and finally, teachers lacked guidance on when and how to use Kiswahili resulting to ungrammatical sentences. Thus if indigenous languages are well developed, code-switching maybe used to enhance mastery of English language for better results. All stakeholders ought to be sensitized on the importance of both indigenous and international languages in learning.

**Keywords:** *Code-Switching, Vocabulary, Language choice, Outcomes*

### INTRODUCTION

Development has been defined differently depending on the focus of discussion. Traditional economic theory view development as an increase in per capita income while the human development theorist emphasize the improvement of the well-being of a people. What is not in contention in all these views is the central role that education plays in the general improvements of peoples' lives. It is for this reason that Kenya's Vision 2030 singles out education as the vehicle that will drive Kenya into becoming a middle-economy. Indeed in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) all countries are

expected to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning by the year 2030.

One of the key targets in SDG 4 is to ensure that by 2030, all girls and boys have an access to complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. A similar target is to be found in Kenya's National Education Sector Support Program (NESSP (2013-2018) that seeks to improve the quality of education and training so that Kenya's measureable learning outcomes in literacy, numeracy, scientific and communication skills are in the upper quartile on recognized international standardized tests by 2017. Some of the identified benefits of improved learning outcomes include amongst others, an economically empowered society that is able to make the right decisions and claim their rights as well as have positive attitudes and values. This can be realized if education is relevant and is able to meet the needs of society. A fundamental concern of any relevant education system must therefore be the choice of language of instruction especially in a multilingual society such as Kenya. This is more so at the entry level – in this case the lower primary school – where the foundation for education is laid. This raises the question of how best primary education would be provided so that learners are equipped for the different roles in the society.

### **Language Choice in Education**

The debate on which language should be used for instruction in primary schools is an indication that language choice is critical in education. In support of this, Trudell 2015 observes that language choice is central to any development regardless of the approach given. In view of this, the language that is chosen as medium of instruction is important in Kenya. Baker 2011:209-210 proposes a bilingual education because of several reasons:

- (i) To assimilate individual or groups into mainstream society
- (ii) To socialize people for full participation in the community;
- (iii) To unify a multilingual society; bring unity to multi-ethnic, multi-tribal, or multi-national linguistic diversity state;
- (iv) To enable people to communicate with the outside world;
- (v) To provide language skills which are marketable for obtaining employment and status;
- (vi) To deepen understanding of language and culture;
- (vii) To preserve ethnic and religious identity;
- (viii) To reconcile and mediate between different linguistics and political communities.

In view of this, learners should be provided with opportunities to access both indigenous and international languages. Despite the existence of Kenyan language policy on the medium of instruction where indigenous languages are used in lower primary and English in all other levels, studies have shown that pupils are not able to read books in their level that are written in English. (Trudell 2015; Uwezo 2014). Since learning should not be memorization but application of new knowledge, it is important that the language of instruction be one that the learners can easily understand. Such process makes the concepts to be simple and relevant to learners' experiences when a learner speaks. This gives our indigenous languages a central position in our education. Despite this critical role, the question of how developed our indigenous languages are towards preparing our learners to be global citizens still arises.

It therefore, becomes necessary that learners are facilitated to acquire international languages so as not to lose out on some opportunities later in life. English is one of the world major languages that has spread globally with over 1.5 billion speakers (Crystal, 2012). Its use is a positive characterization of globalization. In Kenya -a former British colony – the important role played by English language cannot be underscored as those who master it reap many academic, social and professional benefits (Ngugi, 2012). English is also a medium of instruction from class four in primary level to the highest level except when teaching other languages. While English language enables learners to acquire knowledge that would make them global citizen, it is only possible if the learners have mastered it as a language of instruction (Trudell, 2015). There is need therefore to find out how English proficiency can effectively be achieved.

Studies have shown that the role of indigenous languages in second language development cannot be ignored. UNICEF (2003:77) states that “pupils learn better in their own mother tongue as a prelude to and complement of bilingual education approaches”. This was in support of a report by UNESCO that had proposed development of a lingua franca in classroom which was not to substitute mother tongue unless pupils could use it before going to school. This gives our indigenous languages a double edged role in education: to provide a foundation for education and as a bridge to acquisition of the second language. It was the interest of this study to find out how teachers used indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in addition to helping learners learn English language. Since language can facilitate the achievement of national goals in Kenya it is important to find out how teachers use indigenous languages to develop second language. This study attempted to answer the following questions: a) what was the role of first language during English lesson? (b) To what extent did use of Kiswahili influence learners’ performance on vocabulary learning during English lesson? (c) What challenges did the teachers face when using Kiswahili during English lessons?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was based on Baker and Westrup’s 2000 presentation, practice and production (PPP) Framework. Baker and Westrup suggest that in a lesson there are three main phases: presentation phase, practice phase and production phase. Presentation phase being the first phase, the teacher introduced the new language items that pupils needed to learn. When presenting new words, the teachers demonstrated three things clearly: how the word sounds; what the word meant and how and when a word was used. The teacher modified his or her language in order to make pupils understand the meaning of new words or make the input comprehensible (Krashen, 2003). Further, the teacher used the new words in obvious context for pupils to understand meaning of new words. The teacher engages learners in activities geared towards understanding the word structure and the meaning. The current study observed areas where a teacher would shift from English to other languages in order to explain or illustrate words.

During the second step: the practice phase pupils would be engaged in plenty of activities that helped them practise new words. The teachers engaged pupils in different learning strategies. The teachers used different learning activities that would help pupils process the input. The activities include: listening, repeating, writing and reading the new sentence where the new words had been used. The pupils practised individually, in pairs, groups or as a whole class. Baker and Westrup proposes use of strategies and tactics to make conversation appropriate and meaningful. For example, finding topics of conversation that can be mutually understood, speaking at a slow pace, repeating important phrases, stressing the key words in a sentence which eventually would help the pupil in processing new input. It is at this stage that the teacher corrects sentence construction, use of language and pronunciation. This stage is called controlled practice phase. It uses repetition techniques that are used in direct method such as drilling. The pupils are given different activities which will allow them to use the language they have learned in a freer situation. Areas where the teacher or learner used altered their language were observed to find out if it influenced learning in any way.

In the production phase the pupils were engaged in activities which allow free language production. They may have to do some of the activities when they leave the classroom, for example, writing a composition or attempting questions individually from textbooks or from the blackboard. In a classroom situation, the pupils may be engaged in communicative activities in pairs or as a group. The pupils were expected to use the words that they learned before. The researcher used the learners’ written exercises to find out the number of words the pupils were able to correctly use during the exercise after the teacher had altered the language when explaining.

The PPP framework was relevant as the teachers introduced the words, explained the meaning and allowed learners to use words in different learning activities. The study used the learning activities to assess learners understanding on words whose meaning was explained in Kiswahili. Specifically, the production phase activities provided a teacher with the correct feedback on whether learners had understood what they were being taught.

## **Research Methodology**

The study used a quantitative approach to correlate the indigenous language with second language development for better classroom outcomes. Wimmer and Joseph (2006) notes that the design attempts to describe a current condition in any given area of study. A descriptive design describes behaviour of a particular group or individuals. According to Kombo (2006), descriptive design reports things the way they are at that particular time.

Purposive sampling was used in selecting 3 out of the 25 public primary schools in Ruiru Sub County. This enabled the researcher to include relevant categories of schools in the region. Gay (1981) argues that in a descriptive study 10% of the accessible population is enough sample. 3 schools were more than ten percent making the sample enough for the current study. In cases of schools with more than one stream, random sampling was done.

Three out of the 9 lessons which were observed were during vocabulary lessons. The 3 lessons enabled the researcher to develop a checklist for words that were explained in L1. After the lesson, exercise books for pupil who answered questions which related to vocabulary taught were photocopied for the study. A total of 40 exercise books were sampled for analysis. The estimated total number of learners in a class was 30 therefore, 40 books were more than a third of total population from the three classes. The data was used by the researcher to find out how many words the learners got correctly after code-switching was used by the teacher. Studies indicate that classroom assessment may be used to assess learners' development in English four skills and effectiveness of a teaching (Nunan 2003; Steadman 1998; Byon 2005.) This led to an evaluation of how learners performed on words explained in Kiswahili language during an English lesson. Furthermore, a total of nine teachers from the sampled schools were interviewed. Three of whom had been observed during the lesson and the other six were lower primary teachers. The three teachers were preferred for clarification of observations made during data collection.

## **RESULTS**

The teachers were aware of the language policy in Kenya that requires them to use the language of the catchment or Kiswahili in mixed ethnic areas. The classes consisted of learners from different ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, the teachers used Kiswahili as the medium of instruction. The teachers were positive on code-switching despite 'instructions' that required them not to use any other language during English lesson. Teachers indicated that some words were easily explained in Kiswahili than in English.

Despite the head teachers insisting on the use of English language in school, the teachers translanguaged. This is consistent with Lin (2005) observation that code-switching is a localized usage of language. Teachers were observed to use different forms of code-switching which include: Synonyms, questions and reiteration. Synonyms -translation of words into Kiswahili by teachers for learners- explained the meaning of a word for example the meaning of the word accept is given as '*kuitikia*'. Questions were used by teachers to find out whether the learners had understood a topic or establish how much learners knew before introducing a new topic. Reiteration was used by both teachers and learners especially when a teacher wanted something understood, words of the previous speaker would be repeated orally. Teachers used Kiswahili language during English lesson for the following functions:

1. Elicit information
2. Explaining/Informing
3. Correcting learners
4. Allowing learners to participate in the lesson
5. Explaining complex procedure
6. Offering clues to learners
7. Nominating the next speaker

### **Learners' performance on words explained in Kiswahili**

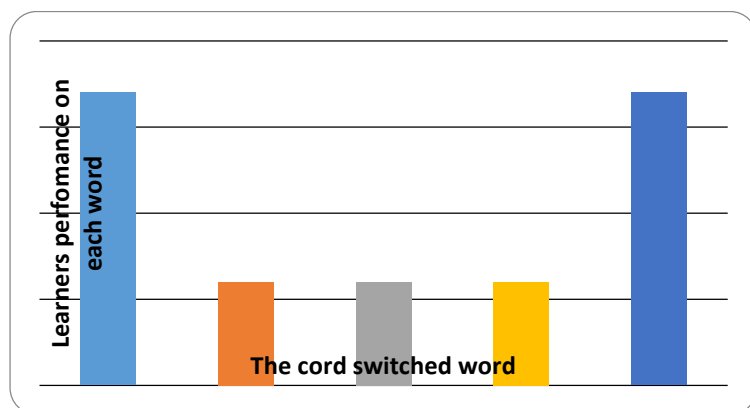
This study used three English lessons in all lower classes levels. Following are results on learners' performance in every question in the three lessons.

**Lesson I: Class one**

**Table 1. Performance on code-switched words**

Word	Frequency	%
Fish	6	67
Rice	5	56
Food	5	56
Mother	5	56
Want /have	6	67
Table	6	67

The observation made from the above table is that at least over fifty percent of the learners were able to answer correctly. The issue may be that the learners were expected to have understood the passage to avoid the mixing. For example learners use the word food together with the verb eating but in this case the correct answer was fish and rice. It shows that the learners understood the word but were required to answer some question as guided by the passage. The study found out that 6 learners out of 9 were able to score over 50% and 4 scored everything. Only 3 out of 9 had less than 50%.



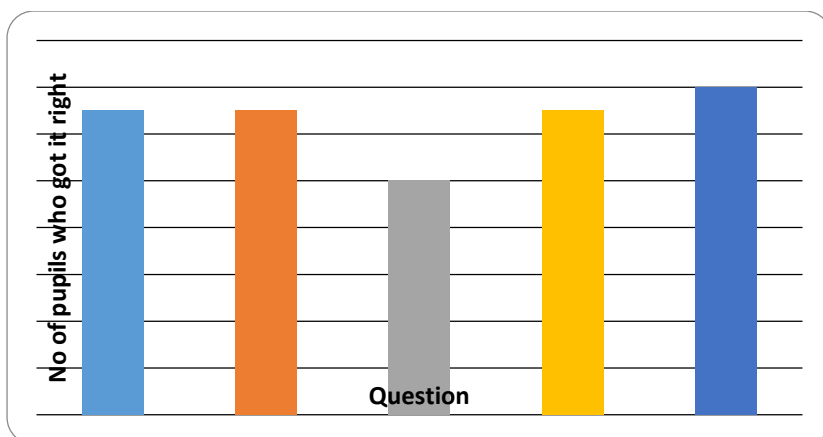
**Figure 1: Learners’ performance on code-switched words**

**Lesson II: Class two**

A total of 15 learners were sampled and the five questions marked. Table 3 shows how learners performed in each question. Although the class was made up of slow learners or those who had come late, most of the learners were able to use the words correctly in the sentences. It was observed that in all questions, more than 12 learners out of 15 got the questions correctly. It is only question 3 that had low score with 10 learners getting it right while 5 did not get it correctly.

**Table 2. Performance on words explained in Kiswahili**

The questions	The no. of learners scoring correctly.	%
1	13	87
2	13	87
3	10	67
4	13	87
5	14	93



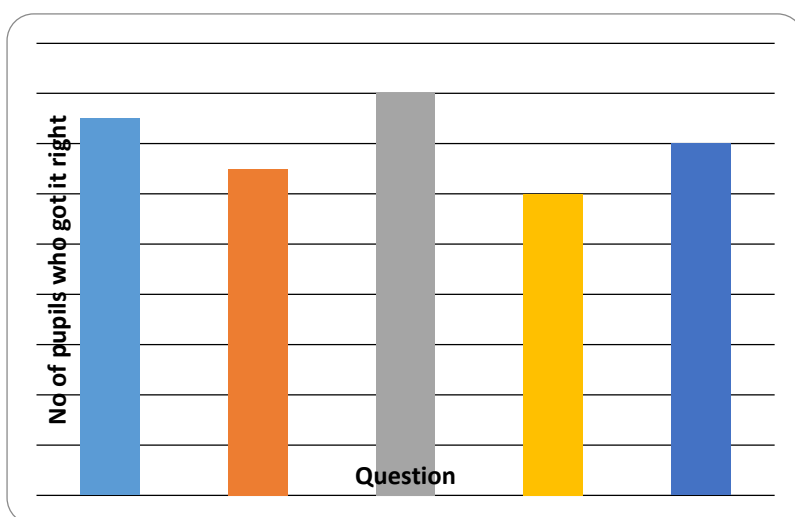
**Figure 2. Showing how learners performed on every question**

### Lesson III: Class three

In lesson 3 a total of 16 learners' exercise books were randomly picked for marking. The results are presented in Table 3 below. The learners were able to answer most of the questions correctly at 100%. The least performed question was question 6 with 10 learners out of 16 being able to get the correct answers.

**Table 3. Learners' performance on words explained in Kiswahili**

Question No.	Frequency (No. of learners who scored correctly)	%
1	15	93
2	13	81
3	16	100
4	12	75
5	14	87
6	10	62



**Figure 3. Showing learners performance on every question**

### DISCUSSION

Debate on whether indigenous language has positive or negative impact during English language learning has been there for a long time. It is for this reason that this study sought to establish the veracity of this argument. Observation during English language lessons and interviews from the teachers indicated that code-switching was used by teachers to improve learners understanding of the content taught. Teachers used different forms of code-switching in the study but synonyms, reiteration and questions were identified as the major ones. Synonyms were used by teachers to explain the meaning

of a word. Ndung'u (2003) has identified use of synonyms as one of the instructional methods. The use of synonyms is supported by Ellis (1994), Parker and Chaudron (1987) who said that teachers try to make their input comprehensible by modifying their language so as to communicate with learners that are very proficient in their second language. By making the input comprehensible through modification facilities, a natural development of second language was achieved. The teachers either gave one synonym or used several words to explain the same word. Gumperz (1992) points out that a teacher may repeat a word in a different code either literary or in a modified form. Such repetition allows the teacher to provide multiple aspects of a word. In so doing, the teachers were able to clarify or emphasize a message.

Questions were the other forms code-switching observed during the lesson. This happened mainly at the beginning of an exchange. The teacher would ask questions about the content of discussion which the teacher already knew. Celik (2008) argues that teachers should know their learner language level as well as their language abilities. The feedback from the question enabled a teacher to evaluate learners' understanding of the word and plan effectively.

Pupils were main users of reiteration. They would repeat words said by previous speaker. Gumperz (1982) observes that Speakers participating in a given conversation may often code-switch from the language they were using to the language used by a previous speaker. This was observed when a teacher explained something in Kiswahili and then posed to learners a question that required them to repeat what the teacher had said or their fellow learner. The pupils were observed to be comfortable to repeat what the teacher or fellow pupil had said in Kiswahili. By quoting, the teacher gets to know if the learners had got the answer correctly. It further, allowed learners to repeat the correct answer. Repetition is a widely used practice that leads to a learner internalizing the concept that was being taught (Swain et al, 2013).

Fairclough (1989) posit that discourse allow a critical analysis of language at a social level and the impact it has on relationships. The implication being that any information in the dialogue has possible effects or functions. Since Wei (2000) identifies code-switching as a discourse strategy to achieve certain interactions at specific points during conversation it was necessary to establish its impact. The study found out that the code-switched utterances whether a question, statement or a reiteration had implication on the learning process. The different functions were elicitation, nomination, offering clues, passing information, correcting learners or allowing them to participate in class discussion.

The teacher initiated discourse in Kiswahili to elicit knowledge about the content being discussed. A direct question was used most of the time in order to find out what the learners knew about item of discussion in order for the teacher to build his or her discussion. Cole (1998) suggests that use of the learners' previous L1 knowledge increase L2 understanding. The main aim of elicitation is to gather information from the learners on the subject of discussion. On the same note the information given by learners enabled the teacher to know when the use of L1 would be beneficial (Celik, 2008). Similarly teachers used the feedback from the learners to assess their teaching method. After pupils failed to answer elicitation question the teachers provided additional information in Kiswahili. Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) suggest that teachers may use statements, questions, commands or moodless items to offer clues to the learners. During the lesson teachers used Kiswahili to paraphrase question and sentences

Nevertheless, if the learners were not able to give the correct answer, explanation was done using Kiswahili language. Although, the learners were hesitant to use Kiswahili, they occasionally gave the synonym of an English word in Kiswahili. Cook (2001) points out that code-switching is an important tool that can be used to give an explanation. The teacher may use L1 to give a translation of a word or a synonym and even contextualize the word. For instance, the teacher first gave a synonym of the word '*respect*' to be '*kuheshimiana*' then contextualized the word by providing the learner with situation that will reflect that they respect someone. Therefore, code-switching helps learning to be effective as learners are able to understand faster when a teacher translates.

Since not all answers from the learners were correct a teacher would correct learners using L1. The teacher would clarify a point especially when learners had failed to give the correct answer. In one of the observed cases the teacher asked learners the meaning of the word greet. The learners gave incidence of when they greet people instead of the meaning of the word to greet. The teacher used Kiswahili to tell them it was not an example of a situation where that word is used but its meaning. Eventually, the teacher gave the correct meaning of word 'to greet' as '*kusaliamia*'.

However, it was observed that the learners' failure to give the correct response may not have been necessarily because of lack of information. Sometimes the complexity of language used in instructions may have resulted to wrong answers given by learners. Consequently, teachers were observed to code-switch to help learners explain complex instructions. This concurs with, Mwangi et al (2009) who observes that first language may be used when instruction of a particular activity has used language that is beyond pupils understanding and the teacher wants the activity done. This was observed in most classes where teachers discussed instructions with learners. In one instance, learner read the instruction and then the teacher used Kiswahili words to find out whether the pupils had understood the instructions. The instructions were later translated to Kiswahili. It is only after the learners had understood the instruction that the teacher allowed the learners to continue with the activity orally.

The use of L1 by the teacher encouraged learners to participate in class discussion. Creases and blackledge (2010) argues that code-switching helps in establishing relationships which increases inclusion, participation and less formal relationship between participants which helps the teacher convey ideas with ease. In classroom discourse the teachers adjusted their language to match that of the pupils. Adjustments may call to simplification or reformulation on the part of the expert which was mostly done by the teachers. By doing so, the teachers reduce learners burden and help in Mwangi et al (2009) encases where a learner can best express himself or herself in L1. This concurs with Nthiga's (2003) findings that the teachers would occasionally adjust their language during the teaching. The adjustment made learners to participate more in a lesson especially when they understand meaning of words.

Teachers used Kiswahili to pick learners who could answer their question especially those who remained quiet. The switch was used to direct the message to a particular person and exclude others. The attention of the person being invited to participate was drawn. Nthiga (2003) argues that nomination gives a learner an opportunity to contribute to classroom discourse. Teachers used L1 to nominate pupils who were quiet may be because language barrier. In doing so all learners have equal opportunity to participate in a lesson. The learners performed well in words where Kiswahili language was used during the discussion which is an indication that code-switching helped in vocabulary learning. This is because code-switching increased cognitive processing of word in learners' mind as observed by Lin (2013). Further, the results confirmed Cook (2001) argument that grammar and vocabulary can be facilitated by code-switching. Such arguments and observations explain why teachers altered their languages during English lessons.

Code-switching is an effective teaching method. However, the use of indigenous language to develop English language for effective learning outcomes faced a number of challenges. Despite Kiswahili language being developed and used in mixed ethnic environments, it remained a challenge to learners whose first language was an indigenous language. The study also observed that teachers are not aware of how they can use code-switching as a learning tool. Consequently, the teachers in some cases were observed to construct sentences that were are not grammatically correct. This reflected speakers lack an understanding of the grammar structure of the two languages. The teachers had not received adequate training on how the process can be effectively used for positive result in their institutions of training. Finally, the misconception that code-switching is used by speakers with low frequency of words has led to code-switching being viewed as a weakness. On the contrary, code-switching reflect an intellectual advantage as speakers moves from one language to another in their conversation.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Education should be made all inclusive by development of indigenous languages in terms of sounds, dictionary and textbooks for use by both teachers and learners. This will help eliminate the construction of sentences that are not grammatically correct. The teachers should not only be encouraged to use indigenous language as medium of instruction but also as lingua franca during the English lesson. However, use of indigenous languages should be limited to when a need arises to allow use of English. Teachers' training colleges should train the teachers on how to translanguage from an indigenous language to English language without affecting development of both languages. This may only happen if teachers are familiar with both the similarities and differences of languages being used. Similar grammatical patterns should be used while structural patterns that are different are avoided unless pupils are exposed for a given reason. Equitable and quality education with positive learning outcomes is achievable if all indigenous languages are well developed for the dual roles in the national development.

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