

Language of Instruction and Education Policies in Kenya

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Abstract

This policy synthesis addresses issues regarding the language of instruction (LOI) through distinct Kenyan educational policy documents. This work points out the ramifications of the lack of clear policies addressing language in the Kenyan education system and the implications, both context-specific and globally on individual identities in such contexts. The conceptual framework used in this policy synthesis follows de Galbert's (2021) idea that emphasizes the impacts caused by lingering linguistic imperialism to highly influence the Global South in educational policies and how the language used in the classrooms might exacerbate inequalities instead of eradicating them. The methodology used analyzes three distinct documents, the *Kenyan Constitution of 2010* (Kenya, L. O., 2013), the *Republic of Kenya's National Curriculum Policy* (2018), and the *Basic Education Curriculum Framework* (2019) in an attempt to present a clear picture of Kenya's LOI policy. This policy brief highlights the implications of positioning English as the LOI, especially regarding the equitable erasure of all the linguistic and cultural identities of the Indigenous languages.

Keywords: Language of instruction (LOI), Kenya, English, education policy, equitable erasure, cultural identity.

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Introduction

This policy synthesis aims to address issues regarding the language of instruction (LOI) through three different Kenyan educational policy documents: the *Kenyan Constitution of 2010* (Kenya, L. O., 2013), the *Republic of Kenya's National Curriculum Policy* (2018), and the *Basic Education Curriculum Framework* (2019). Kenya, formerly a British colony, is now a postcolonial country that has over 70 Indigenous languages in addition to other foreign languages (Mose, 2017, as cited in Mandillah, 2019). Nonetheless, of the numerous languages spoken in Kenya, English and Kiswahili are the only official languages. English, however, is the only language used as the medium of instruction in educational institutions after the lower primary level. Indeed, Indigenous languages are marginalized in educational policies and national curricula, which raises a series of problems related to inclusivity in education.

In this analytical document, we have chosen to focus on LOI following de Galbert's (2021) idea that emphasizes the impacts caused by lingering linguistic imperialism to highly influence the Global South in educational policies and how the language used in the classrooms might exacerbate inequalities instead of eradicating them. Gilbert (2021) also emphasizes that no single language educational system is beneficial to all students in a classroom, and it also creates disparities in the process of policy formulation decisions. Additionally, according to Milligan et al. (2020), the use of dominant global languages promotes barriers in the educational system, mainly because it sets students from minority language groups apart since their learning subjectivities are not aligned with the language used in the classrooms.

It is prevalent in the former colonies of European countries to use a language that does not encompass multiple minority ethnic groups as the medium of instruction. As noted by Milligan and Tikly (2016) most countries of the Global South have adopted a "global language" as their language of instruction after secondary education; in an instrumentalist manner to promote the ideology of English attached to economic development and to undermine Indigenous and local languages at the same time (p. 277). Therefore, multiple postcolonial countries, including Kenya, face similar challenges in transforming their educational policies to make them more equitable and accessible for language minority groups.

It is important to emphasize that in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 document, specifically in Target 4, the purpose of which is to ensure equality in education, there is no mention of promoting equality in education through the inclusion of Indigenous languages. Nevertheless, Milligan et al.(2020) report that it is a generalized issue given that the main SDG 4 document does not recognize accessibility in languages of instruction as a tool for promoting equality, or as a barrier to overcoming current inequalities in educational systems experienced by minority and Indigenous communities worldwide. This is a problematic blind spot in the SDGs that can exacerbate, rather than excise inequality. Therefore, the discussion of SDG 4 is pertinent to this analysis, due to Kenya's commitment to improving access to education throughout the country does not mention Indigenous languages as a priority to be addressed.

As a matter of fact, a wide variety of Indigenous languages that are omitted can be linked to international economic development that reinforces a ‘monoglossic ideology’. The monoglossic ideology implies that even if a country has multiple local languages, it is important to prioritize only one, which is usually not an Indigenous language (García, 2009, as cited in Milligan et al., 2020). Thus, the relevance of this discussion to the field of comparative education relies on understanding how the erasure of traditional sociolinguistic aspects is used as an important tool in a system that tends to homogenize subjectivities in favor of capitalist economic development. Therefore, the aim here is to understand how the absence of clear educational policies acknowledging the importance of addressing traditional languages in schools, both at the national and international level, accentuates inequalities regarding the inclusion of students from traditional communities in Kenya.

To this end, this work aims to point out the ramifications of the lack of clear policies addressing language in the Kenyan education system and the implications, both contextual and global, on individual identities in such settings. The discussion flows by analyzing how Indigenous languages are put aside in the curriculum in the primary and secondary curricula by being taught as optional subjects. Additionally, the lack of implementation of Indigenous language aiming for national development keeps minority students apart from the ideas of development, because access to higher education is contingent on English language proficiency. English is widely used in standardized tests and academic environments, a fact reflected in the *Basic Education Curriculum Framework* (2019) which states that individual success in academic settings is heavily dependent on students' proficiency in English.

Kenyan Context

Kenya is a sub-Saharan country in Africa, and since it gained independence in 1963, it has invested in and adapted its educational strategies to enhance its human capital in order to meet the global market's needs, and foster internal development (Zezeza, 1991). Prior to Kenya's independence, the pattern of education in African colonies used to be established by a myriad of missionary groups motivated by the British crown at the time, which took over the British responsibility in defining educational policies (White, 1996). According to Agonga and Muhingi (2020), race was the central determinant in designing and promoting educational policies during the colonization of Kenya, in accordance with colonial interests, which aimed to provide inputs through the labor force - Native Africans were the least specialized in education, in relation to Asians (medially specialized) and white settlers (most specialized).

Like many other former British colonies, Kenya retained the English language after independence (Kachru and Nelson, 1996, as cited in Michieka, 2005). As part of an effort to unite the newly independent nation, Kiswahili was also made an official language. It is noteworthy that the adoption of Kiswahili as an official language, and the commitment to preserve and develop Indigenous and local languages placed in Kenya's constitution, have not prevented the overuse of English in education and the suppression of minority languages.

As stated before, Kenya's constitution attributes to English and Kiswahili the position of official languages, and the adoption of Kiswahili as an official language did

not prevent English from being used in Kenya's education system. Despite this, Mandillah (2019) asserts that Kenya, as a multilingual country, has three distinct groups of native languages: Bantu, Cushites, and Nilotes. Galbert (2021) describes that the use of European languages in former colonies represents the consequences of colonial practices in the Global South, which consequently affects these countries' power dynamics at all levels, including the language of instruction in academic settings.

Language complexity is cited as a cultural value in Kenya, and it is emphasized that the state will put effort into promoting and making use of Indigenous languages in Article 7(3) of Kenya's national constitution (p. 15). The discussion is immensely relevant in the field of comparative education since the neglect of native languages in national curricula poses crucial questions, and it is obvious how harmful it is to act as gatekeepers for students who have no relationship with, or affinity for English or Swahili.

The Policies

Drawing from three distinct documents, we attempt to present a clear picture of Kenya's LOI policy. Chapter 2, Section 7(1) of the Kenyan Constitution, positions Kiswahili and English as the two official languages of the Republic of Kenya. The chapter goes on to position the promotion and protection of the diversity of languages in Kenya, including Indigenous languages, as one of the obligations of the Kenyan state.

According to the *Basic Education Curriculum Framework* (2019), students are expected to begin at the pre-primary level and be instructed in "the language of the catchment area" (p. 32). After two years of pre-primary education, students are encouraged to be "taught the foundational skills of reading and writing the English language at the earliest opportune time" (p. 36). From grade 4 onward, English replaces the language of the catchment area and becomes the medium of instruction (p. 41). Kiswahili remains a part of the curriculum, while Indigenous languages become optional (p. 41). According to this document, the rationale for English as LOI stems from its position as "the language of education, information, trade, diplomacy, and social networking" (p.41). In order to unlock these global communities, English is positioned to serve as the key.

The *National Curriculum Policy* (2018) represents a concerted effort to implement a competency-based curriculum. The document makes no explicit mention of LOI. However, it does highlight a disparity between what the policy expected students to be able to do, and what students are currently capable of doing. The document stresses a need for the curriculum to be more explicit in what it expects students to be able to do at each step of their education. From these documents, we can gather that the current policy regarding LOI in Kenya is as follows:

- a) For 3 years of pre-primary education the LOI is the language of the catchment area (i.e., the Indigenous language).
- b) From grade 4 onward English becomes the LOI.
- c) English is first encountered by students in a foreign language setting, and before it becomes the main language in which students interact and are assessed.

The rationale for this policy is predicated on neoliberal ideals equating English language proficiency with greater opportunity and access to global sources of power, knowledge, and wealth. This LOI policy seems self-explanatory, but closer reflection reveals a number of worrying potential issues that may reinforce inequalities and ambiguities rather than vanquish them.

Potential Issues

Even in the documents from which we have drawn to highlight this policy, LOI constituted just a handful of lines, even in the *Basic Education Curriculum Framework* (a document hundreds of pages long). The policy previously pieced together required careful sifting through documents and looking into earlier versions. Because LOI is given so little emphasis, these documents do not touch on important aspects of language that might arise during the day-to-day flow of education. This lack of specificity might result in a number of issues.

First and foremost, a potential issue that seems inevitable is that of uneven implementation. From grade 4 onward, English is the LOI. This simple statement belies the depth of ambiguity that could be presented in practice. For instance, is it the case that the content is delivered in English, but students are free to mix between their languages during class, or is English the only language allowed to be spoken in the classroom? Both scenarios could be possible under the current policy. The latter scenario is particularly troubling, as it reinforces the colonialist ideas that the West equates to knowledge, while English equates to education. It is natural for parents to want the best for their children and such connotations may result in parents pushing toward English at the expense of Indigenous languages. In the best case, Indigenous and local languages, ways of knowing, and identities are diminished; in the worst case, erased.

Uneven implementation can have more far-reaching effects when it comes to assessing the efficacy of the policy. If the policy can be interpreted in a variety of ways by institutions or teachers, this can lead to multiple policies unique to each interpretation, and therefore it becomes nearly impossible to interpret outcomes in any meaningful way. This makes any attempt at data collection (such as may be required for SDG4, for instance) a nightmare at best, and completely meaningless at worst. It may in fact serve to obfuscate and reinforce inequity by enabling external factors such as parental demands, national standardized tests, or other testing systems to have greater influence over the practices of teachers, which can, in turn, lead to further disparity in the implementations of the policy.

Implications

The government's ambiguous stance on the language of instruction policy and the 'muddiness' that ensues can result in implications for the learner, and the intended outcome of the learning process. Lack of proper implementation of the LOI policy in lower primary and the increased exposure of the English language, especially from upper primary to post-secondary education, can lead to English taking the dominant role in education and erasing the unique linguistic and cultural identity of Indigenous languages; as well as the replacement of Indigenous ways of thinking and knowing by Western epistemology. With English becoming the dominant language in schools,

learners are expected to learn a new language and at the same time master the subject content in a language that they do not fully understand. As a result, they end up failing to master English, their mother tongue, and the subject content. (Sibomana, 2015).

Furthermore, English is positioned as a ‘neutral’ language in that it is not the native language of any community in Kenya. As a result, it does not advantage one group over another, as using an Indigenous language as the LOI might. However, in effect, this amounts to what we call *equitable erasure*. By forcing every Kenyan to not only learn English but devote most of their educational attention to it in the form of content and language courses, students are being shown, at the very least, that their Indigenous language, culture, and identity are not important, and at worst are erasing them.

One of the co-authors of this paper, Fouzia, has firsthand experience in this regard since she is a Kenyan who went to primary school in Kenya, and later ended up becoming a teacher at her local town high school. She recalls a wooden disk passed around to any student who is heard speaking any other language besides English, and the class monitors writing down the names of those students to hand the list to the class teacher for punishment. This is supported by Bunyi’s (2005) report on the implementation of the language of instruction policy in Kenya. The report states that children are not allowed to speak in their mother tongue as soon as they step into the school compound, until they leave the school at the end of the school day. Associating punishment with one’s own language may introduce cultural trauma and can lead to the “equitable erasure” of native languages and Indigenous epistemologies.

According to the *Basic Education Curriculum Framework* (2019), the rationale for English as LOI stems from its position as “the language of education, information, trade, diplomacy, and social networking”. The justification here is that English is a global language that is necessary to be learned for one to be educated, to be able to participate in the world economy, and be a global citizen. This is further supported by parents’ beliefs that their children learning English early in their lives equals better chances in life regarding future employment opportunities. However, according to Uwezo’s report (2010), a study that was conducted on levels of basic literacy in Kenya found that 85 percent of the children in Class 2 could not read a passage in English, 25 percent in Class 5 could not read the same passage, and four percent in Class 8 could not read the passage, meaning that they leave primary school without the ability to read in English (Mandillah 2019). In addition, according to a UNESCO (2014) report, more than one million Kenyan children of school age are out of school, and one in five youth aged 15–24 cannot read. We agree that English is important and there should be efforts to improve English proficiency, however, the argument is that by making it the default LOI, not only are unique linguistic and cultural identities erased, but it also leads to learning delays as students fail to master English, as well as their mother-tongue, and therefore are not able to grasp subject related concepts.

One can further argue that with such low literacy rates in English, the Ministry of Education (MOE) continues to use English in national examinations resulting in gatekeeping access to higher education. The national Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), which is given to all form 4 students at the end of secondary school, are all set in English except the Kiswahili paper, which focuses on grammar and literacy in Kiswahili only, and is not taught to help students to understand concepts in History,

Science, Math, etc. Not only are marginalized and Indigenous groups left out, but also students with low literacy levels, especially in rural areas, cannot perform well in these examinations and are often left out of getting a post-secondary education.

Conclusion

This policy synthesis regarding LOI in Kenya discusses language policies derived from three different policy documents. As debated in this policy synthesis, the LOI is crucial in ensuring equal access to quality education in line with SDG 4 objectives of inclusive and equal learning opportunities for all. Learning in one's Indigenous language is linked to higher literacy levels and understanding of concepts (Begi, 2014). However, as we argue in this paper, LOI has not been given the attention it deserves in Kenyan policy documents. There is no clear LOI policy, and the existing policies are derived from recommendations of educational reform committees and curriculum frameworks. Even in these recommendations, the instructions are not clear, which leaves room for stakeholders to interpret which language should be used as LOI.

As a result, English is seen to be given a higher status and more exposure as a result of the muddiness and ambiguity of not having a clear language in education policy, which generates a myriad of barriers regarding the democratization of access to education. Additionally, the demand of the global market for the adoption of English as the official language of instruction corroborates the attempt at sociolinguistic and cultural erasure. This is seen outlined in the policies where the justification for using English as the LOI is the assumption that it is a global language that is necessary for education, trade, diplomacy, and socialization. Therefore, we have highlighted the implications of positioning English as the LOI, especially regarding the equitable erasure of all the linguistic and cultural identities of the Indigenous languages.

While this brief looked specifically at the Kenyan context of LOI, these troubling implications can be applied globally to other postcolonial nations. Therefore, it is our hope that this paper contributes further to recognizing and encouraging the discussion of LOI as a barrier to minority groups' educational goals and identities. We firmly believe that spreading awareness about the issues presented in this paper regarding LOI can propagate reflections in the design of inclusive educational policies.

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