

Research Article

Mother Tongue Proficiency and Early Literacy: the Missing Link in Kenya?

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ABSTRACT

This article is part of a larger study conducted to assess levels of Mother tongue proficiency among primary school pupils in Meru Central District, Kenya. The study focused on assessment of the levels of Kimeru proficiency among lower primary Oschool pupils and its impact on literacy among early learners. The study was conducted in five primary schools in Meru Central District using a descriptive research design. The target population comprised of thirty standard four pupils from three public primary schools and twenty teachers from both public and private schools while the research instruments were Kimeru proficiency tests and focused group discussions. This research only focused on class four pupils in selected public primary schools for the reason that they had just stopped learning Kimeru at school. Data was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. The study found out that there are low levels of Kimeru proficiency among primary school pupils. Cognizant of the role Mother tongue proficiency plays in early literacy and learning; primary school pupils have a difficult task acquiring literacy and accessing curriculum (which is in English).

1. Introduction

Across the developing world, countries face challenges in improving learning outcomes. Several of the targets for the new Sustainable Development Goals focus on education quality, or more specifically, literacy and numeracy (United Nations, 2004). There is growing evidence from across Africa, Latin America and Asia that mother tongue grounded multilingual education is the most appropriate solution for children who do not use national or international languages in their home life (Benson, 2004). Mother tongue is the language one acquires first. In the Kenyan context, it, generally, refers to any of the 42 local languages. We may also correctly refer to them as languages of the catchment area. The foundational skills developed in the mother tongue are transferable to a second language. Children build a strong conceptual picture of the world and academic concepts through a language they understand first and later on transfer that to a second or third language (Krashen, 1986). This is in tandem with findings of international research that show bilingual education starting in learners' mother tongue can provide many didactic and linguistic advantages (Baker, 2001).

In Kenya, despite considerable linguistic diversity, the country is increasingly multilingual with Kenyans tending towards varying degree, of proficiency in Mother tongue, Kiswahili and English (Muthwii, 2002). The language policy in Kenya encompasses a bilingual approach in education where the child's mother tongue (or the language of catchment area) is used as the language of instruction in lower primary classes while English and Kiswahili are taught as subjects (Republic of Kenya, 2012). In the upper classes, English takes over as the language of instruction while Kiswahili is taught as a subject. Mother tongue (MT) is dropped from the school system and MT is expected to be acquired at home and in the locality. Whereas mother tongue policies may exist on paper, this sometimes doesn't translate to the classroom.

In many multilingual societies more and more speakers use the mainstream language in domains where they spoke their ethnic language. They adopt the mainstream language as a regular means of communication for they expect that speaking that language springs better chances for rising social mobility and economic success. In Kenya, there is enormous pressure to learn English since it is the language of education and government. Regrettably, a big percentage of Kenyan population does

not attain expressive proficiency in it (Muthwii and Kioko, 2004). Thus, they are not able to participate meaningfully in the important discourses and thoughts, which are by and large expressed in a foreign tongue.

Research by the World Bank, UNESCO and others worldwide indicates that, for optimal and sustainable learning and literacy development, languages that children know well must be used in most of early learning. Many studies have been done to find out the relationship between MT and second language learning. According to Swain (1983), the skills most basic to academic progress and achievement such as the ability to master speech as a symbolic system, to generalize and abstract are most easily learnt in MT. As these skills are cross-lingual, they can easily be applied to second language as well. Thus, it is easier to learn to read in MT and then apply this skill to second language (L2) than to learn to speak and read L2 simultaneously. Once the reading skill is automated through MT more attention can be paid to acquisition of L2. Therefore, additive bilingualism has positive consequences for metalinguistic development, learning of additional languages and more generally for learners' verbal cognitive operations.

Research done in Kenya among primary school pupils has shown low mastery of literacy skills among primary school pupils. For example, the 1998 SACMEQ criteria-referenced English reading tests administered to a representative national sample indicated that 77 percent of Kenyan class six pupils had not attained the English reading mastery level deemed desirable for successful learning in standard seven (UNESCO IIEP, 2001). More recent studies show that the situation has not improved. According to a research released by Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) (2011), more than half of standard three pupils (52 percent) could not read appropriately. They could not comprehend and infer meanings in short passages or use correct punctuation. When learners fail to master such concepts early, it becomes difficult for them to understand more complex ones later. Reading and writing skills cut across all subjects and failure in them leads to poor mastery of others hence low academic/cognitive development.

However, there remains significant resistance to mother-tongue literacy instruction in Kenya though research shows a link between literacy skills in mother tongue and in consequent languages. The benefits are not well understood by parents and teachers, and their preference remains immersion in the language of broader communication (Bunyi, 2005). These findings are indeed worrying. Consequently, the current study assessed MT proficiency levels among standard four pupils. Given the role of Mother tongue proficiency in early literacy and learning if pupils had not mastered adequate proficiency in their MT, then they would have difficulties in acquiring literacy and accessing curriculum.

2. Literature Review

Baker (2001) observes that the term literacy is commonly used but what precisely is meant by it is neither simple nor uncontentious. Conceptions about what is literate behavior have varied over time and place. However, the critical role that literacy plays in everyday lives of people in Kenya as elsewhere in World is incontrovertible (Bunyi, 2008). There are different perspectives from which to approach an understanding of the term literacy. In 1960's, the focus of literacy in Kenya was on basic literacy. Getting the large number of illiterate people reading and writing was the goal of literacy campaigns (Republic of Kenya, 1965).

Presently, policy declarations underscore functional literacy. However, operationalization of functional literacy has not been attained and practice has continued to reflect a basic literacy approach. In most schools in Kenya, the predominant approach to literacy is the functional skills type with its attendant emphasis on test and examinations (2011; Muthwii, 2002b). It is an approach where the learners are given the technical skills necessary to read and write through activities such as learning vocabulary, grammar and composition. They are tested on how well they understand or comprehend information on the printed word (KNEC 1994). Conversely, under the psychological view, literacy is seen as the possession of psycholinguistic skills that enable one to handle symbolic information. Such skills include: reading, writing and communication skills.

In Kenya, literacy surveys and National census are the two literacy- measuring strategies used. Literacy rates in Kenya have risen steadily from 46 percent in 1976 to 73.7 percent in 2000 (MOEST 2003). According to the Kenya National Literacy Surveys (KNALS) report (2007), the country has a national adult literacy rate of 61 percent and a numeracy rate of 64 percent. The critical finding of the study was that on average 38.5 percent (7.8 million) of the Kenyan adult population was illiterate, which was a major challenge, given the central role literacy plays in national development and the empowerment of an individual to have a fulfilling life. Another critical finding was that the age cohort of 15 to 19 years recorded a literacy rate of 69.1 percent. This implies within this age group 29.9% were illiterate and could not read or write in English, Kiswahili or their Mother tongue. This was a worrying finding since the youth form bulk of the population. In this study, literacy was defined as the ability to listen, speak, read and write appropriately in MT (Kimeru) in a variety of contexts. The study analyzed

and described MT proficiency levels based on a psychological view of literacy. Data was mostly collected on performative and functional levels of literacy. Pupils' proficiency was assessed on their ability to speak, read and write in Kimeru.

Cummins (1984) argues that bilingualism does not have detrimental effects on language skills, provided that first-language proficiency is adequately supported. According to the threshold –hypothesis developed by Cummins (1979), a child needs to develop a certain level of proficiency or competence in the first or second language to take advantage of the benefits of bilingualism. According to this hypothesis, bilingual education may provide the greatest support for bilingual learners including linguistic, conceptual and learned knowledge. Additive bilingualism has positive consequences for metalinguistic development, learning of additional languages and more generally for learners' verbal cognitive operations. The threshold hypothesis also suggests that both languages must be given an opportunity to develop if there is to be a long-term positive impact.

Cummins states that cognitive and literacy skills established in the mother tongue or L1 will transfer across languages. This is often presented visually as two icebergs representing the two languages, which overlap and share, underneath the waterline, common underlying proficiency or operating system. Both languages are outwardly distinct but are supported by shared concepts and knowledge derived from the cognitive and linguistic abilities of the learner.

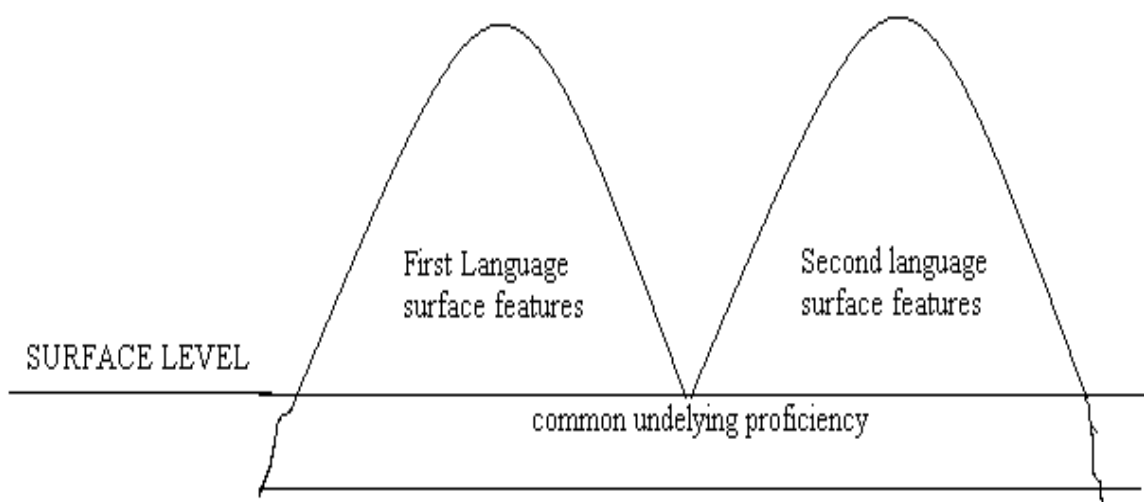


Figure 1.0: Common underlying Proficiency /Interdependence hypothesis (Cummins 1984)

Cummins proposes a minimum threshold of first language cognitive/academic development necessary for success in second language learning. Cummins also suggests that if the threshold of cognitive proficiency is not achieved, the learner may have difficulties achieving bilingual proficiency.

Kenya is a highly diverse, multi-ethnic country comprising people from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The Kenyan government's language of instruction policy is that children should be taught in the language of the catchment area through grade 3 (Republic of Kenya, 2012). This should be in the MT, or the indigenous language spoken in the respective catchment areas where the schools are located. From Class Four, English is used as the medium of instruction (Nabea, 2009). Research has found, however, that most Kenyan students are not sufficiently proficient in English at the end of Class Three to effectively learn content in English in Class Four (Bunyi, 2008; Gathumbi, 2008). Additionally, the mother-tongue policy is widely ignored in Kenya (Ntalala, 2010), with curricular time that is supposed to be allocated for mother-tongue literacy instead reallocated to English or Kiswahili. In some schools, speaking mother tongue is explicitly prohibited and leads to punishment. Given the transitional language policy in Kenya, this study sought to find out the levels of Kimeru proficiency among primary school pupils. This is because according to numerous research pupils who have not fully acquired literacy skills in their MT have limited background skills to bring to the task of learning a second language.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design. The study was conducted in Meru Central District of Meru county in Kenya. The residents of this area are native Kimeru speakers of Imenti dialect. Imenti dialect is considered the standard for the entire

Meru region. It is the dialect used for Bible translation for the larger Meru community and used as a medium of instruction in the formative years of schooling in the region (Mathooko 2009, Mbaabu, 1996).

In this study, Primary schools in Meru Central district were organized in groups of public and private schools. Three public primary schools which teach Kimeru in lower classes were purposively selected while two were chosen among private schools. In each public school selected, four teachers handling lower classes were involved and all class four pupils while four teachers were sampled from each private school. Later, the compositions from each public school were arranged according to sex of the pupils, five girls and five boys were randomly picked for further assessment in speaking, reading and focused group discussion. The total sample comprised twenty teachers from both private and public primary schools and thirty standard four pupils.

According to Kenya Institute of Education (K.I.E, 2002), Primary School Syllabus, pupils are expected to:

- Develop sufficient command of vocabulary and sentence patterns to enable them use mother tongue at home, and in the community.
- They are also expected to acquire pre-reading, literacy and numeracy skills in mother tongue and develop reading and writing skills.

To obtain data, Kimeru proficiency tests were administered to class four pupils to assess their writing, reading and speaking skills in MT. Based on the set objectives, the researcher developed norms for the different competence levels in accordance to the syllabus. Performance in the tests was analyzed using percentage intervals and the scores were graded according to three levels of competence as follows.

Table 1: Competence Levels and Marks in Percentages.

Competence level	Marks in percentage
Below minimum competence level	49 % and below
Minimum competence level	50-69 %
Desired competence level	70 % and above.

Source: *Benchmarks for English Language Education*, Groenewegen Ed. (2008).

4. Findings

Literacy is fundamental for learning in school. It is the ability to read and write and forms the heart of basic education for all (Lewis, 2010). Literacy development is a process that spans through early childhood years and it is one of the most important abilities children acquire as they progress through their early school years. The purpose of the study was to examine MT literacy levels among lower primary school pupils and predict their effect on early literacy. Below are the results and discussion on the three skills tested; writing, reading and speaking.

4.1 Writing skills

Results from tests assessing writing skill showed low acquisition of the skills in Kimeru. Many pupils were unable to express their ideas in simple narrative. From the writing test given, 80 percent of the pupils failed to achieve the minimum competence level, 10 percent demonstrated minimum competence level while only 10 percent had achieved the desired competence level.

Table 2: Proficiency Levels in Writing Skills

	Frequency	Percentage
Below minimum competence level	24	80%
Minimum competence level	03	10%
Desired competence level	03	10%
Total	30	100%

Learners, who had attained minimum competence level, were expected to write compositions using joined script, produce correctly punctuated pieces of writing, spell correctly and express their ideas in simple narrative. Pupils, who possessed desired competence level demonstrated not only the above skills but also wrote with ease, used appropriate tenses and had sufficient sentence patterns in MT. Pupils who scored below minimum competence level were unable to express their ideas in simple narrative and demonstrated lack of sufficient vocabulary and sentence patterns in MT.

According to Wells (1986), a substantial part of pupils learning is dependent on their ability to cope with written language. Therefore, pupils who have not mastered the writing skill will have difficulties in learning. Furthermore, research in L2 acquisitions shows that if a child masters the first language, then learning another language becomes less problematic in that habits of speech such as writing can be transferred across languages (Cummins, 1981). According to Cummins, there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency common to languages and this enables transfer of literacy related skills across languages. Therefore, given the above writing proficiency levels in MT, there is need to gauge the readiness of pupils to use English as LOI from standard four. This is because a large group (80 percent) had not achieved minimum writing proficiency level in MT.

According to psychological view of literacy, learning to write is learning a system of symbols. One must learn the orthography and linguistic structure of a language in order to write effectively. Hence, mother tongue education in the lower primary classes offers the best introduction to literacy that eventually becomes useful in the acquisition of English as a second language (Hakuta, 1986). Writing for communication presupposes that the learner has sufficient vocabulary to draw from in terms of words, that when put together in sentences, phrases or clauses will bring out the intended usage or meaning. In this study, 80 percent of the pupils had not attained minimum writing skills in Kimeru. This was bound to affect their writing skill not only in MT but also other languages.

4.2 Reading skills

Results from the Kimeru reading test indicated low mastery of reading skills. Many pupils lacked fluency, proper articulation and speed when reading. Many of them read hesitatingly and exhibited bad reading habits like vocalizing, pointing at words, regression and moving the head while reading. From the Kimeru reading test given, 50 percent of pupils failed to demonstrate minimum competence level, 37 percent attained minimum competence level while only 13 percent had desired competence level.

Table 3: Proficiency Levels in Reading Skill.

	Frequency	Percentage
Below minimum competence level	15	50%
Minimum competence level	11	36.7 %
Desired competence level	4	13.3%
Total	30	100%

The above findings show that a majority of the pupils had not mastered adequate proficiency skills in reading. This implies that these learners had limited background skills to bring to the task of learning English and using it as LOI. According to Swain (1983), the skills most basic to academic progress and achievement such as the ability to master speech as a symbolic system are easily learnt in MT. As these skills are cross-lingual they can easily be applied to L2 as well. Thus, it is easier to learn to read in MT and then apply this skill to L2 than learn to read L2 simultaneously. Once the reading skills is automated through L1 more attention may be paid to acquisition and reading in L2. Since new input is connected to learners' previous knowledge including linguistic and conceptual knowledge, pupils who have not mastered minimum reading proficiency levels in Kimeru have little skills to bring to the task of reading in L2. Moreover, Cummins (1984) argues that bilingualism does not have detrimental effects on language skills provided that first language proficiency is adequately supported. The skills such as reading, developed in Kimeru will also support the acquisition of academic and literacy related skills in the first and second language. Then and only then will bilingualism be beneficial for these children.

In this study where pupils were not proficient in Kimeru they may not benefit from bilingualism. Consequently, this should be a matter of great concern especially given the drop-out and transition rates in Kenya. Studies conducted in Kenya have shown that many children in primary schools are not performing as expected. A study conducted by Uwezo (2011) in 2030 schools spread across 70 districts discovered that many children are not attaining learning objectives. It was indicated that nationally seven out of ten pupils in class three cannot read a class two story. Consequently, those who acquire some measure of literacy

in primary school but do not proceed to secondary school run the risk of losing any literacy skills they may have acquired in the primary cycle. It is apparent from the study that learners experienced challenges in reading.

Nevertheless, I should hasten to point out that some reading difficulties experienced by the learners within the context of this study could be attributed to problems external to the reader which could include a lack of exposure to MT reading materials, external pressure to learn English, poor reading culture and environment, and inadequate exposure to the contexts in which reading occurs. Indeed, some researchers indicate that the majority of children exiting lower primary school in Kenya can hardly read English words or explain their meaning. They cannot read meaningfully in either their MT or English. If the learners have not acquired basic reading skills, they cannot use language(s) fully. Ability to read is part of education for life in that we are able to read information that is important in our everyday lives (Adams, 2001).

4.3 Speaking skills

Results from speaking proficiency tests revealed that most pupils were fairly proficient in Kimeru. However, many demonstrated limited vocabulary to describe directions though they were able to explain how a visitor could get to their home. From the Kimeru proficiency test, 90 percent of the pupils had attained minimum competence level, 10 percent demonstrated desired level while only 3 percent had not attained minimum level.

Table 4. Shows Proficiency in Speaking Skills

	Frequency	percent
Below minimum competence level	1	3.3 %
Minimum competence level	27	90%
Desired competence level	2	6.7%
Total	30	100%

Due to inadequate mastery of Kimeru vocabulary some pupils resulted to lexical borrowing from Swahili and English. According to Appel & Musyken (1987), speakers who use more than one language may not use either of the languages in ways which are exactly like that of a monolingual speaker. This was the case in this study as many pupils resulted to code mixing and switching in their speech. This affected their proficiency in Kimeru. The proficiency exhibited by majority of the pupils in Kimeru was Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). Cummins (1981) describes BICS as face to face interpersonal communication proficiency which is context embedded because of its face-to-face nature. For this reason, it is less demanding because a wide range of paralinguistic cues and feedback assist the language user. This was the case among the pupils sampled as most of them demonstrated limited Kimeru vocabulary and used paralinguistic features such as gestures while describing direction to their home. Since children's ideas and thoughts are in their mother tongue and will continue to be so long after they have learnt to speak in English; to be encouraged to think for themselves, the children must be helped to do so in their own language.

Nevertheless, the speaking skill was the most developed in the pupils and many were proficient enough to use Kimeru in their daily verbal communication. This may be the most positive outcome of this study. Undeniably, a close relationship exists not only between language and communications but also between language and thought. Proficiency in a language therefore, involves clear communication and easy thought processes. However, for some time it was assumed that the ethnic groups we find in our modern societies were dying out because they were expected to integrate into mainstream society and give up their own lifestyle, culture, language and identity (Appel & Musyken, 1987). On the contrary, the perspective on ethnic groups and ethnic identity has changed. In Kenya this is best exemplified by the mushrooming of vernacular radio and TV stations in the last few years.

5. Conclusion

Research in education and literacy shows that if a child masters the first language then learning another language becomes less problematic in that habits of speech such as listening, reading and writing can be transferred to the learning of the second language. The objective of this study was to find out levels of Mother Tongue proficiency and predict their effect on early literacy. The results of this study have revealed that by the time of transition from Kimeru instruction to English, primary school pupils in Meru Central District have not acquired sufficient literacy skills in MT. Ultimately, due to transition policies and programs for the second language in a multilingual education context, primary school pupils have a difficult task learning English and accessing curriculum. Similarly, due to their limited proficiency and mastery of MT, there is inadequate development of early literacy and numeracy which may lead to school failure and drop out in the early grades. MT proficiency

may therefore be the missing link in Literacy levels among early learners in Kenya. Indeed, mother tongue literacy can be viewed as an added value to multilingual learners' acquisition of early literacy and in other school subjects. Thus, Kenya should enforce the language policy because the current state of affairs may be a predictor to illiteracy and a contributor to poor education achievement. Many pupils may continue to perform poorly in reading literacy tests and subsequently in other academic subjects if the factors influencing reading literacy are not checked. However, there are some research findings which show that transfer of skills across languages is not automatic (McLaughlin, 1987). Early literacy depends not only on MT proficiency but many other factors such as motivation to learn the language, age of the learner, exposure to the language materials and other social, political and demographic factors which must also be put into consideration. Therefore, there is need for a longitudinal study on the role of MT and other contributors to literacy levels in Kenya.

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