Report by Laela Adamson,
winner of the 2014 Education Development Trust **Tim Morris** Award

Language, literacy and learning in Tanzanian secondary schools

Education
Development
Trust

Language, literacy and learning in Tanzanian secondary schools: an ethnographic perspective on the student experience

Contents

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Education Development Trust, established over 40 years ago as the Centre for British Teachers and later known as CfBT Education Trust, is a large educational organisation providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. We aspire to be the world's leading provider of education services, with a particular interest in school effectiveness.

Our work involves school improvement through inspection, school workforce development and curriculum design for the UK's Department for Education, local authorities and an increasing number of independent and state schools, free schools and academies. We provide services direct to learners in our schools.

Internationally we have successfully implemented education programmes for governments in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia, and work on projects funded by donors such as the Department for International Development, the European Commission, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development, in low- and middle-income countries.

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The Tim Morris Award

Tim Morris (1982-2012) was dedicated to providing education to those less fortunate in the developing world. As a key player in CfBT Education Trust's (now Education Development Trust) Business Development department, Tim was instrumental in designing and providing education and employment opportunities for the world's most disadvantaged people. Tim's experience in international education and economics led to the completion of his Masters in Educational Planning, Economics and International Development at the Institute of Education. Tim's dream was to use this foundation to launch his career on aid projects in the developing world. However, Tim was just 29 when his life was tragically cut short by cancer. The Tim Morris Award was set up in his name due to his unwavering passion and dedication to improve education for public benefit worldwide. While Tim is now unable to continue working to help those most in need, his legacy will continue to make a difference.

Launched in May 2012, Education Development Trust's 'Tim Morris Award' offers £2,000 in financial support to a PhD or MPhil student in the field of Education or International Development. The award's aim is to support field research in a developing country.

Our thanks go to Tim's family for their ongoing support and involvement; to Anna Riggall, Alex Elwick and Jess Moore from CfBT's Research and International Development and Education Departments, for their work in selecting and supporting the recipient; and to Laela Adamson, PhD candidate at University College London Institute of Education, recipient of the 2014 Award and author of this report.

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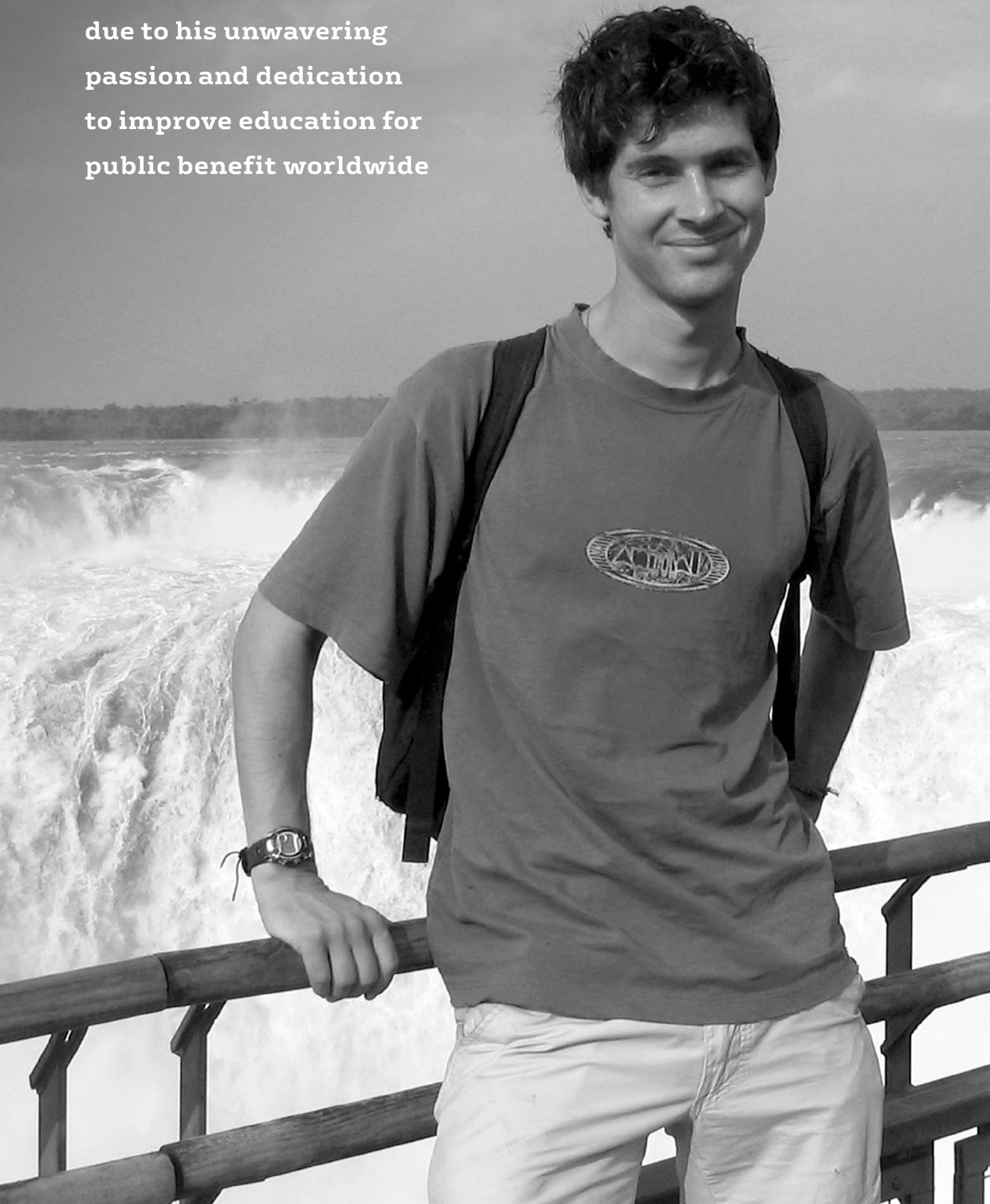
Executive summary

As we move beyond 2015 and consider steps towards the Sustainable Development Goals, it must be recognised that language is integral to quality education. Many students are currently being taught in a language in which they are not confident and this impacts on both their learning outcomes and experiences. This is the situation in Tanzania where secondary schooling is delivered in English, after seven years of primary schooling during which teachers and students use Kiswahili, the national language and *lingua franca*.

Language in education policies are often highly political and although there has been some indication of a shift towards greater and more official use of Kiswahili in secondary education, there is doubt about when, or indeed if, these changes will be applied. Recognising that the current situation will remain for the foreseeable future, this research looks at the student experience in two secondary schools in the Morogoro region of Tanzania. It takes an ethnographic approach, with a view to developing an in-depth and more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by pupils who are learning in a language in which they are not fluent.

After outlining the current language situation in schools, this report identifies six factors that influence students' ability to learn English and to learn using English as the medium of instruction: the lack of an environment that supports language learning; low student confidence and fear of making mistakes; peer relationships and support; parental resources and students' language foundation; government policy and resource provision; and out-of-school challenges that affect learning.

Ultimately, this report supports those who call for a shift to use Kiswahili as the language of instruction throughout the education system, alongside good quality English language teaching. It recommends that the Tanzanian government:

• should not delay changes in line with the 2014 Education Policy that declares a greater role for Kiswahili in teaching and learning

• should lead a public discussion about the role of languages in the education system and the nation. This should include sharing research about the value of using Kiswahili as a language of instruction and the possibilities for learning English as a subject.

This report also offers the following recommendations that could contribute to an improvement in the quality of the learning experience in Tanzanian secondary schools, whether the language of instruction is changed to Kiswahili with English as an additional subject, or remains as English.

At policy level:

• For access to quality education to be equitable, more must be done to support those students whose parents cannot pay for private primary schooling or out-of-school tuition.

Training opportunities:

- Any teacher who will be delivering content or leading activities in English would benefit from additional English language training to improve proficiency and build their confidence.

- Teachers of all subjects would benefit from training in how to support language acquisition in their lessons and how to support students to develop independent study skills.

- Teachers should be trained in contextually relevant techniques for developing a classroom atmosphere that fosters participation and makes students feel more able to take risks and make mistakes.

At school level:

- For students to learn English, they must have opportunities to hear the language and to practise in a supportive environment. The expansion of English clubs or other extra-curricular activities would support this, but time may need to be made within the school day in recognition of the fact that many students travel long distances to school and have significant responsibilities at home.

Introduction and context including an overview of key literature

Language of instruction and quality

When reflecting on achievement against the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), it is widely agreed amongst those involved in education that there has not been enough focus on the quality of schooling. There have been concerns that having access to school does not necessarily mean that students are learning, and a report from the Centre for Universal Education, along with several other calls to action, asserts that we must now shift our focus to demand not just 'education for all', but 'learning for all' (Perlman Robinson, 2011: 3; see also DFID, 2010 and World Bank, 2011). In response, the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include an education target that calls on the international community to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UNDP, 2015: 7). This target also presents challenges because quality education is difficult to define. There is even disagreement about what constitutes learning, what types of learning are most important, and how these can best be assured and measured (see Alexander, 2008; Barrett, 2011; Hanushek and Woessman, 2007, amongst others).

Issues to do with language of instruction should be integral to any definition of quality education or learning. It is the medium through which learning is communicated and most often demonstrated. Yet a significant proportion of the world's students are being taught using a language of instruction than is neither their mother tongue, nor the *lingua franca* in their countries or regions. This is the case across most of Sub-Saharan Africa including Tanzania, the geographical focus for this study.

Between 2006 and 2010 I visited over 200 Tanzanian schools and was faced with the challenges involved in transforming an educational resource, such as a book or a library, into learning. I was particularly struck by the frustration experienced by both students and teachers, particularly in the early years of secondary school when they were trying to cope with the shift in the language of instruction.

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The language of instruction (LOI) is by no means the only cause of poor quality education (see Tikly and Barrett, 2013 for a discussion of factors related to educational quality in developing countries). Moreover, it cannot simply be assumed that failure to pass standardised examinations is convincing evidence that students are not learning. Although the vast majority of Tanzanian secondary schools have an 'English Only' policy, it is extremely common to find situations where code-switching and translation practices are regularly used to enable students to understand content (see examples from classroom observations in Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004; 88-9. This is also upheld by my data). The vast majority of researchers, though, both Tanzanian and international, agree on the fact that students do not learn as well through a foreign language that they do not easily understand (see Brock-Utne, Desai and Qorro, 2003, 2004; Barrett, 1994; Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1997; Rubagumya, 1990; amongst others).

Current language policy context in Tanzania

Currently, Kiswahili is used as the language of instruction for all seven years of primary school, while students are introduced to English as a subject. At the point of transition to secondary school, the language of instruction shifts to English for all subjects, with the exception of Kiswahili which continues to be taught as a subject. Tanzania is unique amongst its neighbours in the way that it continues using Kiswahili for the whole of the primary stage. This was a strategic decision made at Independence to ensure national unity in a country made up of 120 tribal languages. English has remained the country's 'official' language, though, and is very highly valued. It is required for most professional jobs and is considered necessary for individual and national development and global competitiveness. The ability to use English is considered by many to be synonymous with education, yet it is widely recognised that many students face difficulties learning the language (see Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1997). As a result, there has been growing demand for places at private, English-medium primary schools. These schools are under pressure to teach using English from the first class, sometimes against their beliefs and experiences of what would best benefit pupil learning (see Rugemalira, 2005). The findings of this research illustrate some of the equity issues associated with this expansion of English-medium primary provision.

Reducing the length of time when Kiswahili is used as the language of instruction also goes against the advice of academics and educationalists who argue for a greater role for Kiswahili at both secondary and level and beyond. In this context, the Tanzanian government is torn between the advice of national and international experts and the aspirations of their citizens. In February 2015 a new education policy was launched that, among other things, suggests a greater and more official role for Kiswahili in all levels of education (Wizara wa Elimu na Mafunzo ya Ufundi, 2014). There are significant doubts about whether these political commitments will ever be effectively implemented. Even at the launch of the policy, politicians warned that it 'will take decades' to prepare for changes

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(Lugongo, 2015). Moreover, this is not the first time that political commitments to change the language of instruction have been made, but thus far the situation in schools has remained unaltered (see Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004).

If the current language situation in education cannot, or will not, change, then it is crucial that students and teachers have the best possible opportunities to thrive in the current system. We must develop better understanding of the challenges that students face related to language, the strategies they have for negotiating these, and where additional support is required. That will enable recommendations that are relevant to the reality of student experience. That is what this study aims to do.
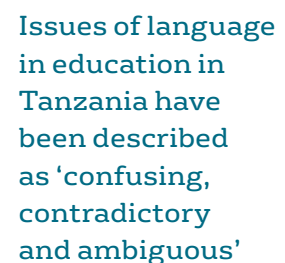
Methodology

Issues of language in education in Tanzania have been described as 'confusing, contradictory and ambiguous' (Brock-Utne, Desai et al., 2003; 5). This resonated with my own experiences – while working in Tanzania prior to conducting this research, discussions with students left me frustrated as they explained the challenge that the use of English creates for them, but then went on to assert that, if given the choice, they would want to continue to use English. Similar findings have emerged from language attitude surveys (for example Mwinsheikhe, 2003). Clearly, this is a complex issue where aspiration and experience can be in opposition.

Although the language of instruction research in Tanzania has tended to be made up of shorter-term projects, within the broader fields of language policy and planning (LPP) and New Literacy Studies (NLS), there is a prominent role for the ethnographic perspective and many advocate that it is not only the most effective for researching complexity, but also for doing it in a democratic way where the perspectives of those studied are well integrated (for example see Hornberger and Cassels Johnson, 2007). Because the motivation behind this research came from seeing the frustrations of students, it was crucial to choose an approach through which their perspectives could be adequately represented. Taking an ethnographic approach also implies certain beliefs about the construction of society, in this case that language and literacy attitudes and practices are socially and culturally embedded, and so need to be carefully observed in order to identify patterns and structures. Within this broadly ethnographic approach, a variety of different methods were used to generate data.

Data collection methods

The process of generating data in this project can be divided into two sections. Although I drove the generation of the bulk of the data, and thus consider myself the lead researcher, I also worked with a small team of student researchers who were involved in designing their own data collection tools. Figure 1 illustrates the different roles adopted by the researchers, as well as the main strategies employed.

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FIGURE 1: RESEARCH ROLES AND STRATEGIES

LEAD RESEARCHER

Observer
General participant observation on site (written up in field notes)

Lesson observation
(51 observations)

Interviewer
Informal where opportunities arose (11 interviews)

More systematic, semi structured approach
(25 interviews)

Teacher/facilitator
Formal teaching / marking of English subject work

Extra-curricular
English clubs

Explicitly research-focused activities, e.g. letter writing, student background questionnaire

STUDENT RESEARCHERS

Interviewers
Designed their own questions and conducted interviews without lead researcher
(18 interviews)

Participant observers
Used recording devices to gather evidence from student activities, e.g. presentations and debates

Workshop facilitators
Co-designed and led two workshops with Form 1 and 2 students, covering a variety of activities.

Local advisers/ critical friends
Reflecting on data they generated

Giving their perspective on lead researcher's findings

Observation

The ethnographic approach to research emphasises observation as the key data collection tool. Researchers become 'participant observers', both involving themselves in community activities, taking detailed field notes and generating 'thick descriptions' of settings, people and practices (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). I spent seven months of 2015 split between two schools in the Morogoro region of Tanzania. After I had obtained the necessary permits, and in negotiation with the district educational authorities, I selected one urban school and one rural school as I expected that the language experiences of students at these different types of schools would differ.[1] At each site I made notes about events and practices that I observed both inside and outside of the classroom, as well as about informal discussions that I had with both teachers and students. I took part in general school activities, such as cleaning, sports or assemblies, and tried to be visible around the schools, spending time both in the staffroom and sitting in places where the students would be able to approach me. I attended inter-school English debates and competition days.

Interviewing

In addition to the informal discussions, there were also occasions where I asked to record interviews with students and teachers to ask more questions about different things that had happened. During the later stages of the research I designed a semi-structured interview schedule and took a more systematic approach to interviewing students in small groups. This was particularly beneficial because it created an opportunity to talk to students who might not have independently approached me. The majority of interviews were conducted in Kiswahili, although some students from the urban school chose to speak English or to mix English and Kiswahili.

Teaching and activities

My age and status as an outsider made it inevitable that I would be viewed as a teacher. I had also been open about the fact that I am a qualified teacher. I wanted to ensure that I contributed to the schools while I was there. I also wanted to build relationships with students and to better understand their capabilities and ways of learning. For these reasons I volunteered for small amounts of teaching, filled in occasionally when the teacher was not present, or supported the teacher, particularly in English lessons. I tried not to present myself as a typical teacher, though. Instead, I described myself as a learner and the whole school community knew that I was trying to learn about their experiences. As well as supporting curriculum activities, I ran after-school English clubs and sessions where students volunteered to take part in specific research activities, for example writing letters to a fictional student in the final year of primary school explaining what they could expect to experience when they reached secondary school. With the classes that I worked with most often, I administered a background questionnaire to find out more about students' socio-economic status and language repertoire.

Student researchers

A key element of the research design was working with a small team of student researchers. Since this study focused on the experience of students, I wanted students themselves also to be involved in shaping the research. I worked with

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these students over the course of my time there to help them as far as possible to understand the research process. They designed and conducted their own interviews, discussed and debated their findings and offered their perspective on issues arising from the data that I was collecting myself. Enabled by the funding received from the Tim Morris Award, these students helped me to organise and lead two workshops that brought students from both schools together to discuss their experiences. As well as being interesting for data generation, it was fascinating to watch the students learn about one another's lives. These experiences in particular seemed to really motivate the student researchers who were keen to discuss everything that they had learnt. Although I have now left the field, we continue to communicate and we hope to write a joint authored paper for a Tanzanian education NGO.
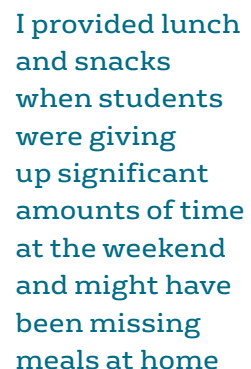
Ethics

Working with secondary school students, mostly between 13 and 20 years old, I avoided some of the ethical issues related to working with younger children. Since this was a long-term engagement, I had plenty of time to discuss my research with members of the school communities and to ensure that they understood why I was there and how I would use the information that I gathered. When I led different activities, students were always given the choice not to participate. As well as the formal permits I had obtained and formal introductory discussions with headteachers, I placed bilingual notices around both schools. When I was observing particular classes I introduced myself and my research in Kiswahili, asking the class teachers to help to clarify any concepts that might have been unfamiliar, such as publishing reports or articles or the fact that all individuals would be guaranteed anonymity. Students were also free to ask questions at any time.

My identity as a white, British female can lead to certain assumptions, particularly that there will be some material benefit to taking part in research. I did have to manage some expectations, but it was also important to me that I contributed to the school while I was there. I tried to do this through teaching and student activities, and I provided lunch and snacks when students were giving up significant amounts of time at the weekend and might have been missing meals at home.

Possible limitations: language

My ability to communicate in Kiswahili was crucial for this project – without it I could not have spoken to the majority of students, or understood a large proportion of what was happening in classrooms, particularly in the rural school. On a number of occasions, when I explained that I was looking for volunteers for interviews or workshops, students stayed very quiet until I stressed that we would only use Kiswahili, at which point there would be a rush of volunteers. But I am not a native speaker and I will have missed some elements of what was being said. Overall, though, I feel that my position as a language learner (of Kiswahili) was a strength of this study, helping me to be viewed more as part of the community and to identify with some of the challenges students were facing. As students watched me make mistakes with the language, it boosted their own confidence, helping them to overcome their anxiety about speaking to me. Working with the team of student researchers also helped because we could negotiate meanings and translations where needed.

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Possible limitations: sample size

Conducting research in only two schools is, of course, a very small sample and there are some indications that what I observed might not be representative of the experiences of all students in Tanzania. For example, the amount of home or vernacular language use in both schools was limited by the fact that there has been a lot of movement of people into the Morogoro region, and thus students speak a variety of home languages. In other, more homogenous parts of the country, home languages are used to a greater extent at school. Furthermore, within each school I could only spend time with and get to know a fraction of the total student population. I took care to speak to a range of students, though, and believe that a variety of perspectives have been represented. Limiting the sample in this way also allowed me the opportunity to build relationships with participants and to develop the in-depth understanding that is crucial in this area.
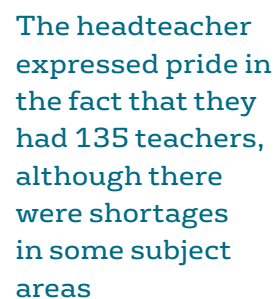
Two secondary schools

To conduct this research I was welcomed into two schools in the Morogoro region of Central Tanzania.

Urban school

The first school was a big, well-established, urban government school. It had 1,700 students on roll, from Form 1 to 6, split across two sites less than 10 minutes' walk apart. The headteacher expressed pride in the fact that they had 135 teachers, although there were shortages in some subject areas. The school was a popular site for teacher training, with three different groups of teaching students in attendance for field practice while I was there. The number of students per class ranged from 65 to 90. This school was connected to mains electricity and had several sources of running water, though they did not all work consistently. Despite being a well-established school, there was no library for either Ordinary or Advanced Level. Although there was a computer room, it was mostly used as an additional staff room and most of the computers were reported not to be working. Although the intake is mixed, the majority of students had at least one parent in paid employment. A number of students stayed in town with relatives or family friends to allow them to attend this school. No full meals were served at school, but there were several shops where students could buy snacks. Most students had money for this on a regular basis. In the 2014 Form 4 national examinations, 182 out of 313 registered students achieved a straight pass, seven passed at credit level, 97 failed and 27 were marked absent.

Rural school

The second school was a rural community school that opened in 2007. It had around 600 students enrolled in Forms 1 to 4. It principally served two villages, each about a three-kilometre walk from the school and both next to the main road to Dar-es-Salaam, although some students came from much further away. This school had around 20 teachers. The average class size I observed was around 30 students, although the number of empty tables suggested reasonably high absence rates. For some lessons, classes were combined so that one teacher would

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teach between 60 and 70 students. There was no electricity or running water. The school had a small farm attached, which students were involved in working. Many students had two parents who are both farmers or had small businesses selling produce. Although there was drinking water and some small snacks available to buy at school, many students did not regularly have money to purchase these. Many students reported difficulty finding the money to buy school materials such as exercise books and pens and I did observe some few students in lessons without these. In the 2014 Form 4 national examinations, of 42 registered students, 11 achieved a straight pass, three passed at credit level, 22 failed and six had their marks withheld because they had not paid the requisite fee.[2]

[2] Examination results data is taken from the website of the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA), www.necta.go.tz. Accessed: 2/10/2015.

Key findings

This discussion is divided into two sections. The first maps out the language situation as I found it in the two schools involved in this study. I briefly describe how languages are currently being used and the language attitudes and values expressed by participants. One striking feature of this research was that the attitudes that individuals asserted in conversation did not always align with the ways in which I observed languages being used. In the second section I present a list of barriers to learning English and learning through the medium of English. This list was created in conjunction with the group of student researchers, although I draw on examples both from data generated by the student researchers themselves and from my own interview and observation data.

The data collected in this project was in a mix of Kiswahili and English. Although Kiswahili was preferred, and indeed required, for most of the interviews with students, some students who were more advanced or more confident with English chose either to speak English or to mix English and Kiswahili. To make this discussion easier to follow, I have presented all quotations in English only and have adapted some phrasing, without losing the speaker's meaning.

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How is language being used in secondary schools?

During this research I met students and teachers with some level of capability in Kiswahili, English, a large variety of vernacular languages, and even other foreign languages such as French or Chinese. Yet, despite this variety of linguistic resources, when I asked about language in the context of schooling, the assumption was that I was talking about English. This may have been because I am a native English speaker, but it also supports the assertion that English is considered to be synonymous with schooling (Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1997). Although I had, from the start, asked broader questions about the different languages that students used, it was interesting that, when the student researchers designed interviews, their questions focused solely on English.

The perceived importance of English

There were a number of reasons given for English being important. At the most immediate level, English was perceived by most as crucial to success in examinations, but it also played an important role in students' daily lives and individual aspirations for their futures. There was also a broader, but equally pervasive discourse about the national interest and Tanzania's ability to integrate into a global economy. Students explained these to me when I asked about it directly in interviews, but I also regularly observed teachers in the classroom making statements about the importance of English in order to impress upon students that they should be trying harder. Interestingly, when listening to the interviews conducted by student researchers, I discovered that many of these statements about the importance of English were repeated as older students used this as an opportunity to advise and encourage younger students. The following excerpt from student researcher, Halima, in Form 4 at the rural school is part of a much longer speech that also includes advice for younger students about how to improve their English.

> **Halima:** 'It's true – English has a lot of benefits. There are lots of things that are rewarded… for example there are those scholarships… someone can get the chance to study abroad… And another benefit of English, for example when you go on the internet and you want to search for materials… but you are surprised that it's hard for you because you don't understand English… Many things in social media have been written in English… Maybe someone sends you something by email but because you don't understand anything, you don't even know how to open an email… So English helps us in various development activities in our communities.'

In interviews, I asked students if it was possible to succeed at school without knowing English well. All students agreed that it was important to know English well. One boy at the town school explained:

> 'Without knowing English, it is not possible to succeed in Form 4 because in the examinations, the questions are in English… you must answer in English. If you write in Kiswahili they will not read it. You cannot have a dictionary or ask for translations.'

Examinations are in English for all subjects except Kiswahili, and the Form 4 national examination draws on material from all four years of lower secondary. Vavrus and Bartlett have criticised the design of these examinations, describing them as a test of language rather than subject content and understanding (2013; 94). A few students did have strategies for coping even when their English was not strong enough to understand what was being asked, although these were mostly considered to be effective only at the lower level of secondary school. One girl in Form 2 at the urban school explained that, if you studied from past papers, the chances were that enough questions would be repeated that you could succeed by memorizing the answers:

> 'Yeah… it's that you study to memorise. Because now we are taught questions that have been used in the past… there are some questions that will be changed to be different, but not all of them…. so there are some teachers who can give

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questions during the exam, even five questions, that you have seen before. You have the features of the questions you have memorised. If they ask in a different way, in this case you fail. But all those other questions that you have memorised you can answer them well and it will only be that one question where you lose marks. So for 80 marks, they will help you… but for the other 20 you fail.'

The value of English was far from limited to passing examinations, though. A male student in Form 2 at the rural school explained: '*Even if you finish Form 4 and get "failure" and cannot proceed to Advanced Level, this experience of your knowing English it can help you.*' He went on to suggest that you might be able to get a job in the tourism industry. When asked about the importance of English, perhaps the most common answer was about being able to communicate with non-Tanzanians. Another boy in the same interview asserted, '*The English language is the language that is spoken in all the countries in the world. Because of this, knowing English is the most important thing in the life of a student.*' The value of being able to communicate with non-Kiswahili speakers was recognised on an individual level, particularly in terms of job opportunities, but also as part of national ambitions for development and growth.

Students talked about the importance of English for any job that they would want to do in the future. Common ambitions were to be doctors or lawyers, or to work in office jobs, such as being a bank clerk. Many students echoed the point made above about English being crucial to have access to jobs in the tourism industry. This was particularly relevant to the students because Morogoro is commonly used as a rest-stop for tourists heading south from Dar es Salaam towards the national parks on the southern circuit, or as a base for exploring the Uluguru mountains. In the rural school, although some students had different ambitions, English was still considered to be important. Two Form 4 boys, Johan and Hamisi, who stated that they did not like English because of the difficulties it created for them, explained:

> **Johan:** '*If you can study English a little here at school and then you go to VETA to get your [driving] licence, then you might encounter someone from another language and if you can speak English with them, they can tell you: "take me to a particular place", and you will be able to drive them…*'

> **Hamisi:** '*… and perhaps they will want to go to the market… and you will be able to translate for them there.*'

Hamisi said that everyone needs some English for their daily lives:

> '*It's very important to know English, even if it won't help you here [at school], but it's important that we know it even here on the streets. For example medicine… the labels are written in English… it costs parents when they take medicine without knowing these things… Also, mobile phones… they all come in English.*'

English was also viewed as the language that held the most potential for national economic growth and development. In my field notes I recorded a conversation with an English teacher from the urban school. This came after a student debate about the new education policy that had indicated a possible shift towards

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Kiswahili as the language of instruction. He was quite nervous about the possible negative impact this policy might have on the country. In his view, changing the language of instruction to Kiswahili would 'cut Tanzania off from the rest of the world'. When I suggested that people from other countries could learn Kiswahili, he was concerned that this might put them off investing in Tanzania, explaining, '*We need them more than they need us*'. I felt a real sense from this conversation and others, including some of the history and civic education lessons that I observed, that people felt that Tanzania was at a disadvantage compared to other countries and that this meant they had to make it as easy as possible to convince others to work with them. Referring to the fact that some other growing countries use their national languages in education, the English teacher said, '*We are not like China – they have more resources*.'

Language and identity

The ability to speak English, then, with all of the advantages that it conferred, was viewed by some as a real badge of pride and success. The Form 5 student researchers explained to me that the ability to speak English formed an important part of their identity as students and acted as a marker that set them apart from those who are not educated. One boy said, '*When people in town hear you speaking English it gives you a kind of status. They hear and think, "Ah! That person is a student".*'

But Kiswahili was also integral to the identity of both students and teachers. One girl told me,'In our lives we use Kiswahili a lot because it is really the language we were born into and it is required to function within our country'. One way of distinguishing between English and Kiswahili was to describe the latter as 'our language', the implication being that English is associated with others outside of the country. The importance of this distinction will reappear in the discussion of the challenges faced in learning and using English.

The importance of Kiswahili

Despite the number of reasons given for English being highly valued by students and teachers, and the clear association of English with education, the language that I heard most often in schools was Kiswahili. Even those students who I knew spoke English confidently defaulted to Kiswahili the majority of the time (I will return to this point in the discussion of barriers to the use of English). The fact that English is the official language of instruction was reflected in the fact that teachers give notes for students to copy into their exercise books in English. Students were also expected to respond to both written and verbal questions in English. In the majority of classrooms, however, notes were verbally translated into Kiswahili and most explanations were given either in Kiswahili or in both languages. One student in Form 2 at the urban school explained:

> '*The language of examinations is English. And English is for all subjects except for Kiswahili. But most people are speaking Kiswahili. When the teacher is not in the classroom, the students speak Kiswahili. Even the teachers themselves speak Kiswahili in the staff room… We are already used to Kiswahili.*'

> Despite the number of reasons given for English being highly valued by students and teachers, and the clear association of English with education, the language that I heard most often in schools was Kiswahili

In the lessons I observed, the use of Kiswahili was crucial for students to develop an understanding of the content being covered. This was particularly the case in the rural school where the level of English was consistently low. In town, most classes had at least one student with a higher level of English who took on a great deal of responsibility for translating and explaining to their peers, both during and after lessons. A rural student explained the importance of translation for their understanding:

> 'When the teacher enters the classroom and speaks first English and after they explain in Kiswahili it helps. Because even if you won't understand in English, in Swahili you will know what this topic is about or the meaning of this word.'

From observations and activities with students it was apparent that a teacher's ability not only to translate into Kiswahili but also to explain a concept's relevance to the students' lives, greatly increased understanding. During a workshop activity looking at the features of a good or a bad teacher, Eve, a Form 1 student at the rural school wrote, '*a good teacher teaches well*'. When asked to elaborate, she said, '*When they teach, they give explanations of what they wrote*'.

Mr Lucas, a young male teacher also at the rural school, was particularly adept at this. His animated stories often made students laugh and they were visibly more engaged when he shifted into this gear. For example, when reading an English text about a bus driver who had to 'watch the road carefully', he switched to Kiswahili to discuss the buses that pass on the main road only 3km from the school. He performed an exchange between people who were making bets on which bus would arrive at its destination the fastest. This made students laugh, but also effectively illustrated his point and sparked a discussion about the responsibility of the bus driver. Examples like these underlined the value not only of translating individual words, but also translating and demonstrating meanings within students' frames of reference. This could only have been achieved in Kiswahili.

Often, the debate around the language of instruction in Tanzanian schools is viewed as a choice of two options, English or Kiswahili. This data demonstrates that both languages are valued and play an important role in students' current experiences of schooling. Furthermore, this polarised debate completely ignores the role of local vernacular languages. Although there is not space for a full discussion here, the data from this project suggests that these languages could be under significant threat in some areas. Particularly in town, many students did not speak the languages associated with their parents' tribes, and those who did undervalued these languages. One girl, when asked how many languages she spoke answered, 'Two – Kiswahili and English'. When I asked if she spoke a vernacular language at home, she said Yes. I said that meant she spoke three language, and she giggled and looked away shyly. A teacher explained to me that students in this area of Tanzania will sometimes pretend that they do not speak a vernacular language when they are at school. He continued that this is quite different to some other areas of the country where there is one dominant language group and then it might be used by students in school more often than Kiswahili.

> From observations and activities with students it was apparent that a teacher's ability not only to translate into Kiswahili but also to explain a concept's relevance to the students' lives, greatly increased understanding

Factors related to learning English and being able to learn through the medium of English
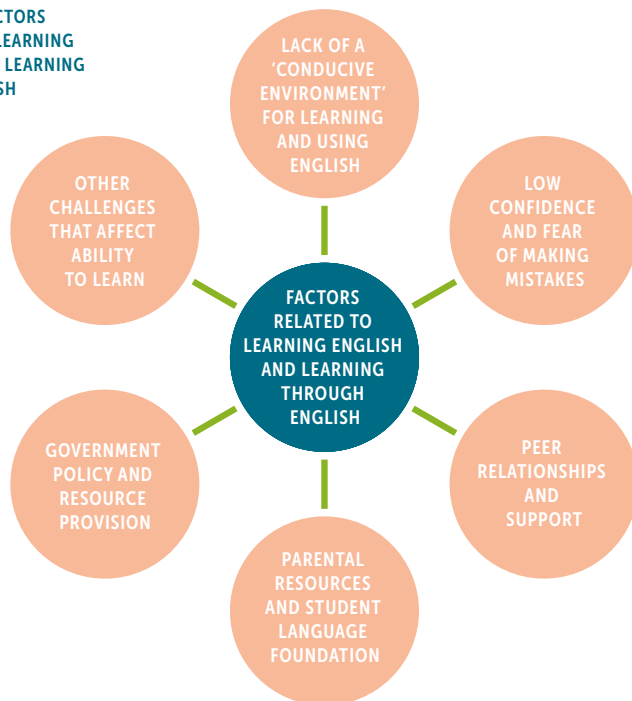
In the two schools involved in this study, the process of learning using English as the medium of instruction cannot be separated from the challenge of learning English. With a few exceptions of students in the higher classes and at the urban school, the level of competence in English was low. Students were consistently presented with vocabulary and language structures that they did not know, yet I observed only very rare examples of teachers in subjects other than 'English' employing strategies to help students to develop their language abilities. Moreover, the language used in textbooks and notes was complex (for an analysis of this, see Barrett et al., 2014). Many teachers, too, lacked confidence when using English and there were many errors and inconsistencies in both the written and verbal examples they gave.

From observation data, interviews and workshops, a wide variety of factors emerged that were related to the processes of learning English and learning using English. I have called these factors rather than barriers because some, such as peer relationships, can both help and hinder. Some of these, such as those linked to lack of resources, I had expected, and were presented very directly when participants listed challenges that they faced. Others I had not anticipated and were not included in lists of challenges, but were things that I repeatedly observed and later asked about. The following list of factors was generated at the end of the period of fieldwork, in reflection and collaboration with the team of student researchers.

In the two schools involved in this study, the process of learning using English as the medium of instruction cannot be separated from the challenge of learning English

Lack of a 'conducive environment' for learning and using English

When explaining why students, and indeed teachers, were not proficient in English, many pointed to the lack of a 'conducive environment' for both learning and using the language. The meaning of this was two-fold. It was sometimes used to point to the lack of resources for language learning, something I will return to under the heading 'government'. More often, though, the term 'conducive environment' was used to describe language environments with which individuals were surrounded. A common complaint was that the prevalence of Kiswahili in all areas of students' lives meant that they were not provided with opportunities to practise English. The head of English at the urban school expressed his frustration that, although there was an official 'English only' policy in school, other teachers could not be persuaded to keep to this policy. Other teachers explained that it was simply unrealistic to insist that only English be used because the students would not understand. A Form 2 student explained the situation from her perspective:

> 'We speak Kiswahili… most of the time we speak Kiswahili. If the teachers instruct us, we speak English, for example if they say that now no-one should speak Kiswahili but only English. But if you don't insist on this we would speak Kiswahili until we reach the president's mansion.'

Several teachers and students described initiatives to insist upon the use of English in classrooms, including the use of a board that students would be required to wear around their necks if they were caught using Kiswahili, but these kinds of measures do not address the issues related to students' lack of confidence and fear around using English.

Low confidence and fear of making mistakes

In all the lessons I observed, there was a common and returning motif. After explaining something or giving an instruction, the teacher asked, 'Do you understand?' This question came in a number of forms: 'Do you understand?'; 'Is it understood?'; 'Are we together?'; 'Do you get me?'; and often their Kiswahili equivalents. The response to these questions was nearly always 'Yes', delivered in chorus. Sometimes, this response is what the teacher felt he or she required as permission to move on. On other occasions, though, this was followed up with questions on the content that had just been delivered, to check understanding. Answers to these questions were much less enthusiastically given. On many occasions, follow-up questions were met with silence. Teachers were visibly frustrated with this situation.

My initial assumption was that students had responded with 'Yes' because that was the answer that was expected, or because they did not want to displease the teacher, but that the content was not, in fact, understood. When I discussed this situation with students, some answers supported this assumption:

> 'In that case the student says that they have understood but they haven't understood. They want the teacher to think that they have understood, but they haven't. They are afraid of asking the teacher and saying, "I haven't understood in this place". Because of this, they simply say that they have understood. Afterwards, if you ask them… they will simply laugh.'

Many pointed to the lack of a 'conducive environment' for both learning and using the language

Other students suggested, though, that this was often not the case. Instead, they said that students often do know the answer, especially when the teacher has been using Kiswahili to translate and explain their notes. Rather, the problem was the requirement to respond to the teacher in English. A Form 1 student from the rural school explained the situation:

'For most the problem is language. Someone knows the answer to the question, but doesn't know how to start to answer in English. Or maybe they have written it in their exercise book but can't start to read the words. This means that when the teacher asks "Do you understand?", it's true that we do understand. But if you ask us the question, we can't tell you. But if you say, "Answer in Kiswahili", we can answer.'

Students were also very reluctant to offer answers if they thought there was a possibility of their making a mistake. Sitting in classrooms, I noticed several occasions where a student had a correct answer written down, or had whispered it to their neighbour, but refused to share it further. Over and over again, students explained that this reluctance was born out of fear:

'Even if they know, they do not answer because they feel shame or are afraid of being laughed at… I mean, there are many other students who have the behaviour of laughing. If a person makes a mistake, they laugh at you.'

Fear of being laughed at was a common theme in my semi-structured interviews. Students explained that being laughed at for making a mistake was not restricted to being at school, or when using English, but that the requirement to use English greatly increased the chances of making a mistake.

There was one teacher at the rural school, an older male history teacher, who seemed to have created a different atmosphere in his lessons from others that I observed. He used a variety of different techniques to check students' understanding and students were more confident to admit that they had not understood. He also encouraged participation in any language. If a student struggled to express themselves in English, he would allow them to answer in Kiswahili and would then support them to translate their point into English. In the majority of lessons, though, teachers' questions were regularly met with silence, and when particular students were asked directly, many would simply refuse to speak until the teacher got frustrated, gave up and moved on.

Although it deserves much more in-depth discussion than is possible here, it is important to point to the role of gender. Gender elements could be observed in most of the areas under discussion here, but were perhaps particularly noticeable when looking at participation in the classroom. The discourse of gender equality was very present – teachers frequently talked about the importance of having the same number of girls and boys answer questions or speak in front of the class. But these requests for equality did not result in equal participation. Students talked about the need to 'show respect' and to 'cooperate' with adults. These terms meant different things depending on context and gender, though. At school, 'cooperation' with the teacher sometimes meant active participation, answering and asking questions, but at other times it meant not challenging the teacher and copying

There was one teacher at the rural school, an older male history teacher, who seemed to have created a different atmosphere in his lessons from others that I observed

notes quickly and in silence. At home, though, 'cooperation' was particularly linked to obedience, expectations of which were different according to gender and location. In the rural area, the gender differences were more striking – girls were expected to be very quiet, but diligent while boys were permitted to be more boisterous. This carried through to behaviour and physical demeanour in the classroom. In town, there were some girls who were more outspoken and, though my attention was initially drawn to them, I noticed that there were still many who remained very quiet.

Peer relationships and support

The example above has illustrated one way in which students have described feeling unsupported or discouraged by their fellow students. Another striking example came from a group of girls at the urban school who were confident English speakers. Gladness, Grace and Rebecca were in Form 1 and described how their proficiency in English had made it difficult for them to integrate into their peer group. Gladness described how students who had been to private English-medium primary schools were singled out by their teachers from the beginning:

> 'They [the teachers] are coming in the class and they are asking, "Hey class, who comes from [English] medium schools?" We raise up our hands and then the teacher says, "Ok, good" and starts teaching and then he just focuses on those students who are from [English] medium schools.'

Despite feeling as if it was their responsibility to support other students with their work, the girls explained that there were times when the use of English was not welcomed by their peers. If English was used outside of activities where it was specifically required by the teacher, the reaction of the other students could be hurtful:

> **Gladness:** [The other students say]'Why can't you just speak Kiswahili?'
>
> **Grace:** 'Some of them say, "Oh look at her, she thinks she's impressive… she really knows how to speak English".'
>
> **Rebecca:** 'Because she came from [English] medium school… every teacher is proud of her… look at her.'
>
> **Grace:** 'For example me, when I go to a classroom to announce something about English Club or anything, I use English… and then they come and say: "There's someone… she is saying that you are just really looking at yourself, that you think you're better than anyone else. Why can't you use Kiswahili? You are Tanzanian… you don't come from England.'
>
> **Gladness:** 'Let's say they feel jealous.'
>
> **Rebecca:**' Jealous, yes, they are jealous some of them.'

These students and others in their situation talked of feeling 'broken-hearted' by the fact that they could not use English regularly in school.

When I discussed these experiences with the student researchers, they felt that it highlighted a tension between 'traditional' and 'modern' attitudes. One boy, Ishmaili, described his experiences of returning to his parents' village during school holidays to be accused of insulting his family if he spoke English.

English had made it difficult for them to integrate into their peer group

Although both students and adults would explain why it is important to know English and for students, their aspirations for the future seemed closely tied to the ability to speak English, they also wanted to be accepted and comfortable in their present realities. Frequently, this meant making the choice to use Kiswahili.

It is important to note that peer relationships did not always have a negative impact on the learning and use of English; in fact many students listed 'choice of friends' among the factors that can help a student to succeed. Other students, whether older students or siblings, or students in the same class with stronger English skills, often played a key role in an individual's academic and personal development by offering additional support and encouragement outside of lessons.

Parental resources and students' language foundation
The example of Grace, Gladness and Rebecca points to a growing challenge facing the Tanzanian education system. Although access to education has been dramatically expanded, economic and social inequalities are strengthened by the use of English as the language of instruction at secondary level. Those with greater financial resources and longer personal experiences of education are better placed to support their children in the acquisition of English. These parents can afford to send students to one of the growing number of private English-medium primary schools, they can pay for books and for private tutoring. They can also offer opportunities to practise English that other parents cannot – several of those students at the urban school with stronger English reported that they spoke some English at home. By secondary level, the sense that students who went to government, Kiswahili-medium schools, are disadvantaged is well engrained. The exchange below between the student researcher, Halima, from the rural school and a group of younger students illustrates this well:

> **Halima:** *'So you like using Kiswahili because it's the national language. Don't you think that English… why don't you personally like speaking English?'*
>
> **Student 1 (Addressed):** *[Silence]*
>
> **Student 2:** *'Maybe I can help him… He doesn't like using English because he doesn't know it. He used Kiswahili a lot in primary school. There was one subject where he used to speak English. After coming here the system changed. Having to use it causes problems until he can use it comfortably.'*
>
> **Halima:** *'Go on.'*
>
> **Student 1:** *'Yes – proceed! (giving other student permission to continue speaking on his behalf)' [laughter]*
>
> **Student 2:** *'It causes problems for him because he studied in a 'Kayumba' primary school.'*
>
> **Student 1:** *'The rotten foundation was in primary school.'*

The term 'Kayumba' school was used by many students to indicate government, Kiswahili-medium primary schools. Kayumba is actually a boy's name and was the name of the character in a series of short cartoons used by the Tanzanian NGO, Haki Elimu, to highlight issues of poor quality in government primary schools. After independence in the 1960s, the choice to use Kiswahili as the language

> It is important to note that peer relationships did not always have a negative impact on the learning and use of English; in fact many students listed 'choice of friends' among the factors that can help a student to succeed

of instruction in all government secondary schools was respected as part of the process of nation-building (see Topan, 2008), but many of the students in this study associated Kiswahili at primary level with low-quality schooling and disadvantage. Over and over again, teachers told me that their students had 'a problem of language' and blamed the 'poor foundation' at primary school.

Government policy and resource provision

The most popular suggestion offered for remedying the current situation was that the government should change the language of instruction in primary and pre-primary schools to English. This was considered vastly preferable to changing the language of instruction at secondary level to Kiswahili. There was an assumption that, if English were not the medium of teaching, students would not learn it. On the other hand, when I asked about the future of Kiswahili if it were not used in schools, people were not concerned. Referring to the fact that Kiswahili is used in most domains outside of education, they explained, '*They [students] will learn Kiswahili everywhere*'. Considering that the widespread use of Kiswahili in Tanzania is only 65 years old and was the result of a deliberate policy, this confidence concerns me, especially alongside the way that vernacular languages seemed to hold particularly low status because they were not used in education. The 2014 Education Policy asserts the important role of Kiswahili both nationally and regionally, but perhaps, alongside this, the government needs to lead a broader public discussion about how languages are learned and maintained.

A shift to the use of English for teaching in primary school would also require significant financial investment in teacher training and resources, an area that is already stretched. Students talked about shortages of books, particularly in non-science subjects that have not been identified as government priority areas, but which many students choose to study. This was considered to be important both for access to subject content and for exposure to English. One student advised, '*The government should increase the books in English which will make [sure] that students read these books and know the English language well*.' Students also expressed concern about the quality and professionalism of teachers. Some of those students who spoke English well, especially the older students, expressed a belief that teachers should not be using Kiswahili in the classroom. One of the urban student researchers argued, '*I think the government should give us better teachers who have already been to study English and know it well*.' Since there are already serious concerns about resources for schools, it seems to exacerbate the problem to prevent both teachers and students from maximising the linguistic resources that they already have.

Other challenges that affect students' ability to learn

On two occasions during this fieldwork, I organised weekend workshops that brought students from the urban and rural schools together. These were led by the student researchers and when I asked them to reflect on what they had learned, many were shocked by the challenges that rural students faced in their lives outside of school, which affected their capacity to learn. These included but were not limited to: lack of money for fees and other school costs; lack of food; high levels of farm- or housework; regular illness; lack of encouragement from family members; pressure to marry early; and living far away from school.

> A shift to the use of English for teaching in primary school would also require significant financial investment in teacher training and resources, an area that is already stretched

These challenges were particularly prevalent at the rural school, with girls facing the higher out-of-school workloads and concerns about being forced to leave school early, but they were also experienced by students in town. They affected students' attendance and ability to concentrate. One of the most striking differences between the interviews from the two schools was in the students' confidence that they could succeed in school. In town, most students in Form 1 and 2 reported feeling confident that they could pass the Form 4 examinations. At the rural school, students were much less confident. Rosa, a Form 2 student, explained:

> 'I feel certain that I can [pass the examinations] if my home life can change. Because I would need time to study, I would need money to attend tuition. But like this, I don't know.'

When debating the language policy in Tanzanian schools, it is important to recognise that a shift in the language of instruction would not be a magic panacea. Students face a variety of challenges, both at school and at home. It is in this context that it is frustrating that the choice to use English as the medium of instruction makes the process and experience of learning more difficult than it might be if students were allowed to discuss and demonstrate their understanding of different topics in Kiswahili, the language with which they are comfortable.

Conclusions and recommendations for policymakers and practitioners

This report has described an ethnographic study into the student experience of learning English and learning using English as the language of instruction in two Tanzanian secondary schools. It has highlighted a number of different findings relating to language attitudes, the supportiveness of the environment for learning English and issues of learning and understanding. Students do not only experience challenges related to language in completing their work, but language inequalities also impact upon their peer relationships and their sense of wellbeing in the classroom.

Students describe a number of common, negative experiences that are directly related to the requirement to use English as the language of learning. During this research I observed, and pupils explained, that Kiswahili is crucial for their learning. When Kiswahili is used, it transforms students' engagement in the classroom and improves the quality of their learning experience. Giving Kiswahili a more prominent role in the teaching, learning and assessment processes at secondary level would make better use of the linguistic resources of both students and teachers and would give students the opportunity to demonstrate understanding in a language with which they feel comfortable.

English is highly valued by students, though, and so a greater role for Kiswahili would need to be accompanied by improved English language teaching for all, ensuring that unequal provision did not reinforce existing linguistic inequalities. Moreover, a public discussion about language would be required to reassure students and parents that this approach is in the interests of better learning of both subject content and skills, and English language.

This report has identified six factors that influence students' ability to learn English and to learn using English as the medium of instruction. In light of these findings the following recommendations could help to improve the current situation and support students to be more able to succeed and to improve their sense of wellbeing in the learning process.

> Students describe a number of common, negative experiences that are directly related to the requirement to use English as the language of learning

At policy level:

- Government should not delay changes in line with the 2014 Education Policy that declares a greater role for Kiswahili in teaching and learning.

- Government should lead a public discussion about the role of languages in the education system and nation. This should include sharing research about the value of using Kiswahili as a language of instruction and the possibilities for learning English as a subject.

- For access to quality education to be equitable, more must be done to support those students whose parents cannot pay for private primary schooling or out-of-school tuition.

Training opportunities:

- Any teacher who will be delivering content or leading activities in English would benefit from additional English language training to improve proficiency and build their confidence.

- Teachers of all subjects would benefit from training in how to support language acquisition in their lessons and how to support students to develop independent study skills.

- Teachers should be trained in contextually relevant techniques for developing a classroom atmosphere that fosters participation and makes students feel more able to take risks and make mistakes.

At school level:

- For students to learn English, they must have opportunities to hear the language and to practise in a supportive environment. The expansion of English clubs or other extra-curricular activities would support this, but time may need to be made within the school day in recognition of the fact that many students travel long distances to school and have significant responsibilities at home.

> For access to quality education to be equitable, more must be done to support those students whose parents cannot pay for private primary schooling or out-of-school tuition

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