

Choice of the Medium of Instruction in Kenyan Preschools: Averting Xenocentrism

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to prompt a critical and reflective discourse on the dismal use of mother tongue in Kenyan early childhood education (ECE) institutions in an attempt to detect existence of xenocentrism. Although the Kenyan ECE policy framework sanctions use of the language of the catchment area when teaching and communicating with the young learners, many teachers continue to use English. Though studies have tried to identify factors that deter use of mother tongue, it is not clear whether the practice could be an indicator of xenocentrism. The objectives of the study were to assess parents' and teachers' competence in mother tongue, how they valued mother tongue and their willingness to have children learn their mother tongue. The study used descriptive research design. The population comprised preschool teachers and parents with children in preschools in a rural zone in Kiambu County. Data was collected through interviews. The results revealed that parents and teachers promoted use of English. Parents felt that the schools that used English were superior to those that used mother tongue. Some teachers argued that, since most of the reading materials were written in English it was necessary to introduce children to the reading language early in life. Many teachers and parents claimed that the world had turned into a global village and it was not necessary for them to be competent in mother tongue. It was evident that majority of the teachers and parents did not attach much value to mother tongue.

Key words: Mother tongue, indigenous language, English Language

1. Introduction

The importance of use of mother tongue in early childhood cannot be overemphasized. Mother tongue, defined as the child's indigenous language, connects children to their cultural heritage (Moran, 2001). It thus promotes cultural identity and subsequently, self-esteem and empowerment (UNESCO Bangkok, 2005). Use of mother tongue helps conserve ethnic languages and provides a sense of pride in one's identity. According to Cummins (2000), children who are exposed to their mother tongue have the advantage of learning from folk stories that could be unique to their culture, yet very beneficial for performance in life. Knowledge of mother tongue thus provides a spring board from which individuals access the fruits of development (Ball, 2010).

According to UNESCO (2007), use and recognition of the indigenous languages facilitates inclusion of all people in matters that affect their lives. Studies have established that children who use many languages are more likely to acquire better cognitive skills as compared to users of one language (Bialystok, 2001; Borich & Tombari, 1997; King & Mackey, 2007). Studies (Bialystok, Craik & Freedman, 2007; Stern, 2002) on cognitive decline revealed that the age of onset of dementia was four years earlier for adults who used only one language.

Research (Baker, 2000; Cummins, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) has also established that use of mother tongue has positive effects on children's linguistic and educational development. The studies claim that children with a firm foundation of their mother tongue develop more creativity and flexibility in their thinking processes. Cummins (2001) further argues that language skills are transferred between languages meaning that, those who develop mother tongue vocabulary and concepts are more prepared to learn the school language.

In a study that focused on children's ability in perceptual analysis, Bialystok and Shapero (2005) established that children who used a first and second language performed better than the monolinguals. Likewise, a study by Costa, Hernandez and Sebastian-Galles (2008) purported that bilinguals, as contrasted with monolinguals were better able to selectively attend to stimuli. This could be attributed to the selection that is inevitable as children use the different languages from early childhood.

On recognition of the importance of mother tongue, the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO) held in 1999, proclaimed 21st February as an International Mother Language (Mother tongue) day. Since then, the day has been widely celebrated (UNESCO, Bangkok, 2013). Nations have also engaged mechanisms and policies to safeguard the indigenous languages.

However the rate at which many of the indigenous languages are becoming extinct is alarming (Cummins, 2001). Shaeffer (2003) contends that with the current trends only 10% of the world's total languages will be surviving through the generations by the end of the 21st Century. Ball (2010) further argues that loss of indigenous languages will lead to depletion of cultural knowledges that are unique to each ethnic group.

According to Walter (2010), many of the African nations, continue to put much emphasis on colonial languages. In these situations, the colonial language is viewed as more prestigious than the indigenous languages (Adegbija, 1994; Hornby, 1977; Ndamba, 2008, Ngugi, 1986). In a study among Tanzanian students who learnt in Kiswahili at school, Campbell (1999) established that despite the fact that the students could hardly communicate in English, they preferred learning in the foreign language because they perceived it superior to indigenous languages.

In Kenya, one of the National Goals of Education is to promote respect for and development of Kenya's rich and varied cultures. Since Culture is embedded in language (Wierzbicka, 1999), the education system should emphasize on use of indigenous languages. The effort to ascertain promotion of the indigenous languages is evident in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy framework (Republic of Kenya 2006) that recommends use of the language of the catchment area as the medium of instruction in early childhood educational institutions. Consequently, children learning in the purely rural schools, where the inhabitants use a common language, should be taught in the indigenous languages. In addition, in an attempt to protect the indigenous languages in Kenya, a language bill was passed in 2013 (GOK, 2013).

Despite the efforts to promote use of the indigenous languages in Kenya, separate studies (Begi, 2014; Wambiri & Ndani, 2014; Wanjohi, 2014) reveal that many teachers and parents still prefer use of English language even in the rural schools. In an attempt to establish the reasons behind the situation, the studies sought teachers' views and the responses revolved around children's academic performance. Considering the benefits of use of mother tongue and the fact that the teachers have an obligation to adhere to the Language Policy Framework (Republic of Kenya, 2006), it is expected that preschool teachers would ordinarily use the languages of the schools' catchment areas. In addition, teachers and parents in the rural set-ups were expected to be able to use the indigenous languages of the schools' catchment areas without any extra effort. Despite all the positive pointers to the use of the indigenous languages, studies had claimed that the teachers and parents of young children in the Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) centres, still supported use of foreign languages. This made it necessary to establish whether the teachers' and parents' views were a sign of a negative attitude towards their culture, a condition, referred to as xenocentrism.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

This study sought to establish any influence of xenocentrism in preference of language of instruction for young children. The study mainly focused on the language that parents and teachers were most competent in, their use of mother tongue with the children and teachers' perceptions on the use of mother tongue. The study also sought to determine parents' willingness to have children learn their mother tongue. The responses were used to gauge any contempt on the indigenous languages and subsequently the cultural heritage, and the incidence of xenocentrism.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design and sample

This qualitative study employed a descriptive research design. The population of the study comprised parents and teachers of preschool children in a rural zone in Kiambu County, Kenya. It was necessary to focus on a rural zone since there was a high probability of a common mother tongue that could be used in all preschools in such set-ups.

Purposive sampling was used to select the purely rural zones in Kiambu County from which random sampling was employed to select one educational zone. The preschools were categorized as either public or private. The public preschools were considered as those that were attached to public primary schools and the preschools that were run by the local community. The private preschools were run by individual entrepreneurs or other partnerships. In the zone, there were ten public and five private preschools. All the private preschools were involved in the study. Random sampling was used to draw a 50% sample from the public preschools. All the teachers in the sampled preschools were included in the study. In total the sample comprised 25 teachers out of whom 10 were from private and 15 from public preschools. Through convenience sampling, a sample of 31 parents was drawn. Only the father, mother or guardian was considered as a parent. The parent sample consisted of ten parents with children in public while 21 had children in private preschools.

2.2 Instruments

The researcher designed interview schedules for parents and teachers. The interview guide for the two groups had both closed and open ended questions. The first question was on the language that the respondents were most competent in. The other questions sought to collect data on the parents' and teachers' preference of the use of the language of the catchment area or mother tongue in preschools and the reasons behind their language choice.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Face to face in-depth interviews with both parents and teachers of preschool children were used, on one- to-one basis, to collect qualitative data. The researcher conducted the interviews with the teachers on one to one basis, during the school days. The interviews with parents were carried out as parents came to school on businesses that included bringing food or picking children from school.

3. Results and Discussion

The data were analysed and presented thematically, according to the study objectives. The findings are presented in the following sub-sections.

3.1 Teachers' and parents' competence in the language of the catchment area

The first objective was to establish the language in which the parents and teachers were most competent. Apart from two teachers from private preschools, all parents and teachers in the sample claimed that they were most competent in kikuyu, the indigenous language of the catchment area. This was similar to the situation in Nyeri County where all the teachers of the young children were speakers of the indigenous language of the catchment area (Wanjohi, 2014). Teachers' language competence differed from the situation that had been established in Thika where some teachers whose mother tongue was kikuyu claimed that they were not competent in the language (Wambiri & Ndani, 2014). The teachers who were non-Kikuyu speakers said they were most competent in their mother tongue, which was completely different. For all parents and the teachers who claimed to be most competent in kikuyu, the researcher switched to kikuyu language after the first question. This was to corroborate interviewee's competence in the language and also to facilitate freedom of expression. This helped to rule out the possibility of incompetence in indigenous language as a cause of preference of English language as the medium of instruction among the respondents.

The two teachers who could neither speak nor understand kikuyu language hailed from ethnic groups that did not even use the Bantu language. They claimed that in the schools, children were not supposed to use mother tongue, hence did not have any problem. However, both teachers claimed to be most proficient in their mother tongue. When asked how each communicated with the young learners, their responses were based on the school policies. Both said that the schools' language policies did not allow use of mother tongue. One claimed that a child did not need to be very good in English for communication to take place. The other one said that she understood children's body language. The researcher further asked each of the teachers whether they knew that children were supposed to be taught in the language of their catchment area, which in the case was Kikuyu. In both cases they answered in the affirmative. Although the teachers were teaching in different private schools, both claimed that they had been employed in the institutions to discourage use of kikuyu by other teachers. When asked why they would knowingly opt to teach young children whose mother tongue they could neither speak nor understand, one remarked, "What matters is the salary offered." This was in line with Wanjohi's (2014) findings that established that although the teachers knew the language policy they failed to implement it due to demands from their employers.

3.2 Language used as the medium of instruction in preschool

The second objective sought to establish the language used as the medium of instruction in the sampled preschools. Among the teachers who were most competent in kikuyu, those who taught in private preschools said that they always used English. Asked why they did not adhere to the policy guidelines, yet that was the language in which they were most competent, they argued that the essence of private schools was to make children speak English competently and to pass their examinations. They claimed that the directive to use English exclusively came from the schools' authorities that could not be challenged. Teachers were then asked what they thought about the managers' understanding on the choice of the medium of instruction in preschool. Apart from one teacher who said that there was too much pressure on the children, others were comfortable. One of the teachers said that children learnt English very fast and she did not understand why the government required them to use languages that could be learnt at home.

Many teachers argued that use of English facilitated children's success in interviews to join Standard One (Std. 1) in prestigious schools. These findings were consistent with the study by Wanjohi (2014) that established that parents perceived English language as a means to better performance. Similarly, a study on use of indigenous

languages in Zimbabwe, revealed that parents perceived English language as more functional than the indigenous languages (Ndamba, 2008).

Kikuyu speaking teachers who taught in public schools said that they used Kikuyu, English and Kiswahili. When asked how they decided on the language to use, they all said English would be better for performance, but were concerned that children found it difficult. Some said they used Kiswahili as a substitute for English to make children realize that they were in school. When such teachers were asked how use of kikuyu would work against 'school seriousness,' some teachers said that kikuyu language was almost exclusively used in some homes and that it was necessary for children from such homes to know the difference between home and school. This could suggest that mother tongue was not a serious language and thus should be left at home. On further probing the teachers were asked why they did not want children to view the school as related to home. Two teachers said that it was necessary but language was not the only link. When asked why then they wanted to exclude the language link, they said that other languages were more important. Others argued that children needed to get acquainted with languages that would be beneficial in their school life. These responses showed that these teachers had low opinion of the indigenous language and that they were oblivious of Cummins's (2000) argument that the drastic change in the use of language from home to school is often counterproductive.

3.3 Language used at home

When parents were asked how often they used mother tongue at home, the responses were diverse. Eight of the parents with children in public ECDE centres said that they used kikuyu to communicate at home. The other two said they used Kiswahili. When asked why they used Kikuyu language, the responses revealed that, those who claimed to use kikuyu, used it because there was no other option. The following responses to the question were common:

'But I do not have another language. If I try to use English my children jeer at me!

I did not complete my school, the little English I have, is just for asking for water.'

The two that used Kiswahili claimed that at least they were better than their neighbours who just used Kikuyu. The use of, '*just Kikuyu*' suggested that the language was perceived as inferior to the others. Murray and Smith (1988) argue that this stance may lead to negative attitude towards one's mother tongue. This further suggests some inclination towards development of xenocentrism.

Out of those with children in private schools, more than half the number of parents said that they used English to reinforce what had been taught in school. Some said that their children would get confused if at home there was no follow up in the new language. One parent, claimed that she was not lucky enough to have learnt English. She said that she employed house helps who could speak English for the sake of her child. Some parents argued that knowledge of English would make their children's voices heard. When asked whether use of Kikuyu in preschool would mean failure to learn English later, many parents said that they needed to get immediate results. An excerpt from one parent with such sentiments was as follows:-

'If only I learnt that English I would never speak in Kikuyu.'

When asked why they favoured a foreign language the parents said that they would like their children to be as brilliant as the *Wazungu* (Europeans). This is what Ngugi (1986) and Walter (2010), referred to as colonial mentality. Another common response was that Kikuyu language was no longer useful since the world had become a global village. This meant that such parents were ignorant of the fact that multilingualism plays a positive role in globalization (Cummins, 2001). This further suggested that such parents were ready to abandon their culture in an attempt to become like others.

3.4 Teachers' perceptions on use of mother tongue

Teachers were asked whether it was necessary to use mother tongue as the medium of instruction in preschools. Five of the teachers who taught in public preschools said that children needed the language to communicate with their parents who were not competent in English, but the language was not necessary in school. However, all teachers said that children needed to know their mother tongue. When asked whether mother tongue would be necessary if the parents could speak in English, two of the teachers said that if it were possible, mother tongue could be avoided since it led to tribalism. The teachers advocated for *Kiswahili* rather than mother tongue. This argument had been dismissed by Cummins (2000) in the argument that it is impossible to have a mono-cultural world. Two teachers said they were not sure of the importance of mother tongue apart from communication with parents who were not competent in English language. One of the teachers argued that since schools should teach from known to unknown, it was necessary to start young children off in their mother tongue. The teachers further claimed that teaching of mother tongue was the responsibility of parents as opposed to school set-ups.

Six of the teachers who taught in private schools said that mother tongue was not necessary since children just needed the language they would use for the rest of their lives. One said, *'English is everything a child needs to succeed in life.'* When asked whether those who spoke English had everything in life, she said that the world was changing rapidly and English was going to be very important during the children's adult lives. On further probing, the teacher was asked whether Kikuyu language would be necessary then and she quickly answered in the negative. She said that there were no offices where the language would be used. She also said that Kikuyu would not be necessary in some years to come. When other teachers were asked to confirm the sentiments, more than half supported the perspective.

Another teacher said that language was necessary for transmission of culture but at the same time expressed doubts with regard to the importance of indigenous cultures. With exemption of one, the teachers agreed that mother tongue was important but the school should use English since it was the examination language. On the contrary, one teacher expressed her concern on the loss of knowledge within cultural riddles, proverbs and folk stories that initially facilitated development of accomplished adults. This viewpoint was similar to that of Cummins (2001) and Ngugi (1986).

3.5 Parents' willingness to have children learn their mother tongue

Parents were asked whether they would like their children to be taught in Kikuyu. Almost all the parents with children in public school expressed their disappointment with the teachers for failure to teach their children in English. Some said that their children were disadvantaged. The following were some of the sentiments:-

'Now, children in the private schools are taught in English while ours still use kikuyu, yet they will sit for the same exam. There is no hope that they could compete at the same level'.

Some parents claimed that children who used English exclusively became brighter. When asked whether all the successful people they knew used English in their childhood, these parents said that the world was changing and it was unwise to compare the past with the present. One said that Kikuyu language was important in the past but those who matter in the contemporary world were speakers of English language. This suggested that parents perceived speakers of a foreign language as privileged, and sought the same 'privilege' for their children.

Among the parents whose children were in private preschools, one respondent said that she took her son to a private school and was paying fees to ensure that he learnt English, the language that would propel him to greatness. More than half of these parents expressed their satisfaction with the idea of exclusion of use of mother tongue in the private schools. Those who said that they would not mind inclusion of some Kikuyu felt that use of the language was necessary at the initial stages for communication but still argued that mother tongue should be phased out as children gained competence in English. When asked whether kikuyu was in any way important for their children, some parents said that if mother tongue was important it would have been one of the examinable subjects. Some parents said that children needed some little kikuyu to ensure that they would not be side-lined by others in their own community, but at the same time, they argued that the school should not take the responsibility of teaching Kikuyu since this could prompt confusion as children learnt English. When asked where children would learn the little Kikuyu, some said that the Kikuyu language that the young ones had learnt at home, was enough. These respondents were oblivious of the benefits of mother tongue that included improved academic performance (Bialystok, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). The fact that parents and teachers, without scientifically based argument failed to prefer a language that they were most competent in for their children, suggests that there could be some element of xenocentrism.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that all parents and almost all teachers of young children in the rural set-up were competent in the dominant indigenous language of the catchment area. However, many teachers especially those who taught in private schools did not utilize their expertise to nurture the children's competence in their mother tongue. The results of this study suggest that parents and teachers of young children attached more value to English language than the indigenous languages. The respondents only focused on academics as the role of the school and did not associate indigenous language with cognitive development. Consequently, they almost ignored children's mother tongue. Parents and teachers were not willing to have the children use mother tongue because they perceived it as inferior and inconsequential. In addition they perceived mother tongue as a drawback to cohesion and globalization.

4.2 Recommendations

The results of this study led to the following recommendations:-

1. Since parents and teachers largely favoured use of the examination language from early years, measures should be taken to create awareness on the benefits of indigenous languages on children's academic performance. The contribution of indigenous languages in effective globalization should be publicised.
2. Indigenous knowledge and positive cultural aspects should be deliberately acknowledged. On the linguistic dimension, this could be done by putting more recognition and publicity of the international day of the mother language.
3. Research on the factors that influence private entrepreneurs' choice of the language to be used in their schools should be carried out to help identify and promptly thwart any inclination towards xenocentrism.

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