LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION: THE FORGOTTEN FACTOR IN EDUCATION QUALITY AND STANDARDS IN AFRICA?

Paper for presentation at the CODESRIA General Assembly
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Introduction
One of the failings of poverty reduction efforts has been in the attempts to globalize the approach to empowerment and poverty alleviation, which can never be tailor-made for all societies. The globalization trend that has advocated the one-global-village theory comes packaged with ready-made answers, such as those by the Breton Woods institutions – the World Bank and IMF, to the problems that the world faces. The education sector is no exception here. The stance that has glorified the use of ex-colonial masters’ languages as the media of instruction, which is an offshoot of these institutions’ prescriptions, has had very negative effects on the delivery and reception of education in most African countries. It is these negative effects that the present paper examines.

The paper begins the discussion of the issue of language-in-education by giving some anecdotes that relate to the language and cultural factors that have affected the learning situation in the history of the University of Dar es Salaam (henceforth UDSM) in Tanzania, taking these as, hopefully, representative of the language problems faced by many tertiary-level institutions in Africa.

The present author has, in conjunction with other researchers, carried out research into the question of the language medium of instruction, with regard to the situation in Tanzania. In the research, the views of parents, students, teachers and policy makers were captured. The second part of the paper, therefore, gives
a bird’s eye view of the linguistic situation in Tanzania after which it presents some of the research-based findings.

Next, the paper relates the language question to the fears concerning the way the use of a particular language medium of instruction is said to affect the standards and quality of education. Invariably this has to do with the notions of empowerment of Africa to liberate itself through meaningful education delivered via a language of instruction that both the teachers and the learners fully understand and are comfortable with in manipulating different concepts and ideas. The aim is to see how development, defined by Sen (1997) as the “process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy”, has either implied the growth or dwarfing of capabilities of persons to lead the kinds of lives they value through education. We think that this part of the discussion is very important since this is an issue that has formed a major part of the arguments put forward against the use of indigenous languages and in favor of the use of foreign languages as media of instruction in the education system of most African countries.

The Language/Cultural Hitch

Okonkwo (1983: 377) aptly states that the methodical but often ignored disparity between the language and culture of the school and the language and culture of the learner’s community have repeatedly resulted in educational programmes with only trivial accomplishment in teaching anything except self-depreciation.

In the same vein, Kent and Mushi (1995) have given an account of how the drive towards universal primary education in Tanzania raised the expectations and aspirations of parents and pupils. These hopes gradually contributed towards the development of an elitist culture that was not easy to stem. Such a culture permeated not only the education system but also it influenced people’s
perceptions of such issues like work, employment, and language values. This observation tallies well with Julius Kambarage Nyerere’s views on national culture, that among the sins committed by colonialism, none was the most humiliating than that of being robbed of, and being made to look down on, our own culture.

The above kind of outlook is reflected in the short history of the UDSM. It is very interesting to note that in a recent book by Mathew Luhanga - the current Vice Chancellor of the UDSM, and other top managers of the University, there is no mention of the language problem in the main text in spite of its being highlighted as a stumbling block by way of “interview notes” by Mr. Pius Msekwa and Prof. G. Mmari - two former UDSM Vice Chancellors, and Mr. George Mkuchika, a former student of the UDSM. We shall take some snapshots of the interview notes, focusing on those areas that deal with the language question.

Mr. Pius Msekwa was appointed Vice Chancellor of the UDSM on 1st July, 1970. The Terms of Reference provided to him by the Appointing Authority in the person of the President of the United Republic of Tanzania and the Chancellor of the UDSM, the late Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, insisted, among other things, that the UDSM as a national University of the time must be led by a strong administrator who would help strengthen it as an institution with identical values to those of the Tanzanian Government and society; and also to bring the UDSM nearer Tanzanians. Mr Msekwa related these specific Terms of Reference to the problems that his tenure faced as narrated in the “Interview Notes” thus:

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Mr. Msekwa led UDSM to take measures to strengthen it as a national University and to build into it the values that could identify it with the Tanzania Government system and people. This was the context of bringing UDSM nearer to the Tanzanian society. One of these measures included conducting the 1970/71 graduation ceremony in Kiswahili. These measures were perceived by foreign students and the student government as undermining and downgrading the status of the University.³

Indeed, as a result of, among others factors, the above language issue, a crisis was fuelled at the UDSM that even led to the expulsion of the President of the Students’ Government, Mr. Akivaga – a Kenyan national.

In the next line of Vice Chancellors, it was Prof. G.R.V. Mmari’s tenure that faced a similar language and cultural problem as the above one. He was appointed Vice Chancellor of the UDSM on September 1st, 1988 – 18 solid years after Mr. Msekwa. In narrating the kind of mindset that the UDSM community had at the time of his appointment, Prof. Mmari said, among other things, that most academic members of staff, especially the expatriate staff, were apprehensive about the relations between the UDSM and the state. This is stated in the “Interview Notes” as follows:

The socialism momentum intensified and staff, particularly expatriates, feared that academic standards would fall and that probably teaching in Kiswahili would ensue.⁴

It is this same linguistic fear that continues to grip not only the British Council and Alliance Françoise, but also the mindsets of some Tanzanian parents, teachers, policy makers and students today - 16 years after Professor Mmari’s tenure. It is interesting to note in the “Interview Notes” with Professor Mmari, that at that time, like today, “Language difficulties faced by students (made) it

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³ Mathew Luhanga et al, ibid, p.174.
⁴ ibid. p. 184
difficult for some of them to have dialogue with their teachers” (Luhanga et al., 2003:187).

Interestingly, the UDSM Academic Audit Report\(^5\) had also clearly indicated that there are serious communication problems facing the university students and staff. As the way out, the Report had suggested that we either switch over to Kiswahili as the language of instruction or we officially allow bilingual policy to be adopted at the University of Dar es Salaam. The Audit report had them made two conclusions. The first was quite proper, and it was given as follows:

…it was evident that most students have problems with the language medium of instruction (i.e. English). Proficiency in the language is low and leaves much to be desired…One can only guess what will happen when the seniors begin to exit in numbers in the next four or five years and the University is forced to recruit from among the products of secondary school English language training of the 1980s and 1990s. Then the problem of English language communication among University teachers will be visible and painful…If nothing should have been done by that time, then it should be time for the University to decide going into the lingua franca (Kiswahili) – a language in which both teacher and student will be able to interact meaningfully and confidently (UDSM, 1999: 71-72).

The second, this time very perplexing, confusing and contradictory conclusion, was then stated, one page after the first, as follows:

But judging from the current and projected global trends and the fact that English is fast becoming the ICT language globally, UDSM should continue to use English as a medium of instruction (UDSM, 1999: 73).

The excuses for using English as a medium of instruction based on “global trends” and the fallacy of English as a global “ICT language” have surfaced every now and then among policy makers, parents, teachers and even students as shall be seen later. It suffices here to say that the Academic Audit Report is a very valuable document that has, unfortunately, just been archived in spite of its

\(^5\) See the University of Dar es Salaam Report on the 1998 UDSM Academic Audit (March 1999).
research-based and genuine concerns regarding the issue of the language of instruction at the UDSM, its hasty conclusion on the same notwithstanding.

We have narrated the above episodes and anecdotes as a backdrop to our discussion on the issue of language-in-education and the research done on the same. It is with this background in mind that the present paper tries to situate the language-in-education predicament within the context of the education offered in Tanzania. First, however, in order to put our discussions into proper perspectives, let’s examine the linguistic situation in Tanzania.

**Tanzania’s Linguistic Situation**

Tanzania, with a population of 35 million, is a multilingual country with three common language-groups namely, **Local Languages** or, as some call them, “Vernaculars”, **Kiswahili** and **English**.

**Local languages**

Local languages are those spoken by different language groups. These are usually connected with not only well-defined so called ethnic groups, but also with specific culture, identity and location. It is estimated that more than 120 local languages are found in Tanzania (Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1997; Legere, 1992; Brock-Utne, 2000). Local languages are usually the languages of intimacy, i.e. of the home and close friends in informal situations. They play an important role of identifying ethnicity, and they are not assigned to any official function.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Of course there are some *informal* institutions of learning, such as ritual activities in many language groups that use local languages as the media of instruction. I have italicized the word informal since, to these language groups, the institutions of the *rites de passage* were, indeed, very formal, and this puts to test our notions of formal education. Research into this and other modes of the delivery of indigenous knowledge would be very interesting indeed. This is, however, beyond the confines of this paper.
Kiswahili
In spite of the fact that many Tanzanians speak more than one of the languages of Tanzania, the country has one common Bantu language, Kiswahili, which is understood and spoken by almost 95% of the population (Batibo 1995: 68). Though a Bantu language, Kiswahili cannot be regarded as a local language per se because it is not exactly attached to a well-defined “ethnic” group. Kiswahili is the national and official language, and it is used in political speeches, as a lingua franca within the country and in East Africa. It is also the medium of instruction in primary schools7 and the language of parliament, courts, mosques, and churches. Furthermore, Kiswahili is the language of transport, banking, national public life and post office. In addition, Kiswahili is spoken widely in some neighboring countries like Kenya, Uganda, DRC, Rwanda and Burundi. Indeed Kiswahili and its literature have become a cultural fact for many East and Central Africans. The major reason for this is in language efficiency. For, this Bantu language has grown among East and Central Africans from a means of mere broad communication to that of broad and very elaborate expression.8

7 Kiswahili is used in public primary schools only.
It is interesting to note that even if Kiswahili language is not assigned any role as a medium of instruction at secondary and University levels, it is, nonetheless regularly used in those institutions. It is used for various activities, inside and outside the classrooms. Some secondary school teachers teach in Kiswahili to make the subject matter easier to their students instead of English which is officially assigned. Teachers find it necessary to teach in Kiswahili so as to enable their students to understand the subject matter despite the fact that examinations are set in English. Kiswahili is also non-officially used for various activities at the universities in Tanzania. Most of the time university students communicate by using Kiswahili, especially when they are discussing academic issues, in spite of the fact that, again, the official language of instruction is English (Mochiwa, 1991; Brock-Utne, 2000; Malekela, 2003).

**English**

English is neither an indigenous nor indigenized language in Tanzania. It is not a native language to Tanzanians, and its knowledge is essentially a product of schooling. It is a foreign language introduced during the British colonial rule in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). At that time it was used both as a language of administration, promoted as a medium of instruction in schools, and as an official language. It is only 5% of the Tanzanian population who speak English as the second language in Tanzania (Schiemed, 1989 cited in Brock-Utne, 2000:174; Batibo, 1995), and this percentage is dwindling every new day. As English is used as the medium of instruction from secondary level up to the University, one would have expected that more than 5% of the population would be fluent in the language. This, however, is not the case.

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As stated earlier on, Tanzania is a multilingual society and most Tanzanian students reflect a wide range of linguistic backgrounds. The majority of such students, especially those from the rural areas, have vernacular languages as their mother tongue. Those born in towns have Kiswahili as their mother tongue and only very few have English as their first language. There is a growing tendency of highly educated parents to use English at home as their lingua franca with each other as well as with their children. Such children, who grow up speaking English as their first language, have been termed by Mazrui and Mazrui, (1998:137) as *Afro-Saxons*. It is, however, easier said than done to mould Afro-Saxons in Tanzania due to the country’s sociolinguistic circumstances. Parents in Tanzania fashion artificial English-speaking milieu, which cannot be persistently sustained. This is so because children are obligated to converse in English at home, while sometimes, if not most of the time, the parents that force such children to speak English are, themselves, not proficient in English. In reality, English is neither the parents’ nor the children’s first language. Most of the time, especially when they are playing with their peers and when they communicate with the community members, such children use Kiswahili.

The above situation and the dismal situation in schools, among other factors, especially at secondary and tertiary levels, did prompt the research by LOITASA. We consider this research project next.

**LOITASA Research**

The question of language-in-education has attracted a number of studies and research projects in Tanzania. These include those by Mlama and Matteru (1978); Criper and Dodd (1984); Kibogoya (1987); Rubagumya (1990); Brock-Utne (1993; 1995; 1997; 2000; 2001, 2004); Mwinsheikhe (2001); Mkwizu (2002); Vuzo (2002), and Galabawa, Malekela, Qorro and Senkoro (2004). Most of the latest works
have been through LOITASA, an NUFU-supported research project that began in January 2002. The project aims at improving the use of indigenous languages in teaching and learning through research and competence building within Tanzania and South Africa. By generating research and building research capacity and competence in language development and teaching, LOITASA continues to critically examine the relationship between language of instruction and learning.

In examining the current language-in-education situation in Tanzania and South Africa, the project asks several questions, viz.: What are the current policies regarding the language of instruction in the two countries? To what degree are the policies being implemented? What forces are working to have the policies maintained or changed and in what direction? What is the underlying reasoning behind the current policies? How have the policies changed over time? How does the language policy actually work in the classrooms of Tanzania and South Africa?

**A Summary of the Findings**

At the UDSM it is the Faculty of Education in collaboration with the Departments of Kiswahili and Foreign Languages and Linguistics, and the Centre for Comparative Education of the University of Oslo that undertook the assignment on the efficacy of using indigenous languages as media of instruction in the country. The main goal is to improve the quality of Education through the appropriate language medium of instruction.

Generally, the purpose of the LOITASA project in Tanzania has been to utilize the UDSM expertise available to build competence and research capacity in the language of instruction among secondary school students and teachers. To that end, the LOITASA researchers have used questionnaires to get the views of
teachers, students and parents regarding the issue of the language medium of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools. They have also used quasi-experimental methodology to obtain snapshot conditions, attitudes, and events in secondary schools in Tanzania.

All the LOITASA research done in Tanzania clearly indicates that English can no longer serve efficiently as a medium of instruction in secondary school and tertiary education in the country and that Kiswahili should replace it. The findings indicate how difficult it is for students in secondary schools and tertiary levels of education, to speak English, let alone understand when they are being taught in English. In secondary schools the situation is even worse as the **SPEAK ENGLISH** rule is expected to help students improve their English language proficiency as they get punished whenever caught speaking Kiswahili or any language other than English. Most reports indicate that in spite of the official policy, in government secondary schools English is, to a very large extent, not being used as the medium of instruction and that teachers teach their lessons in Kiswahili and only give the notes for the same in English. The teachers realize that the use of English as the medium of instruction compounds communication, performance, and, thus, empowerment. More discussion on this state of affairs follows later in this presentation.

**Perplexing Teachers’, Students’ and Parents’ Views**

As stated earlier on, research was undertaken by the LOITASA group to seek and gauge the views of different players and stakeholders in secondary education with regard to the issue of the language medium of instruction in secondary school education in Tanzania. These included teachers, students and parents. The results were quite perplexing indeed. For example, in the questionnaire that was used to seek the views of the teachers, nine questions
were asked. Besides the first three that sought for the preliminary information on the respondents such as age, level of education, gender, etc., the next six were as follows:

Q. 4:  When you teach your subject in English, do your students learn with some difficulty, hardly learn, or do not learn at all?

Q. 5:  When you try to teach your subject in Kiswahili, do your students learn with some difficulty, hardly learn, or do not learn at all?

Q. 6:  Judging from the reality of your teaching and the way your students comprehend what you teach, how much would you prefer to teach in English?

Q. 7:  Judging from the reality of your teaching and the way your students comprehend what you teach, how much would you prefer to teach in Kiswahili?

Q. 8:  Judging from the situation on the ground regarding your teaching and the way your students comprehend what you teach, how much do you code-switch between English and Kiswahili when you teach?

Q. 9:  How much do you agree or disagree with the contention that many Tanzanians would not like Kiswahili to be used as a medium of instruction for all subjects in secondary schools?

The most perplexing results in this research among teachers is that, in spite of the fact that the majority of them feel that their students learn with great ease when they are taught in Kiswahili, when asked whether they would prefer teaching either in Kiswahili or English, 50.9% of the same teachers responded that they would prefer teaching in English as opposed to 34.0% who would prefer using Kiswahili. The same perplexing results were obtained from the student respondents who, in spite of admitting that English is a communication and, thus, intellectual hindrance to them, they showed a clear false attitudinal fear that using Kiswahili as a language of instruction in secondary and tertiary level education would imply a loss of English language. This kind of loss would, in turn, isolate them from the international community. These fears also included
the apprehension that teaching in Kiswahili would affect the standard and quality of education. We examine this type of fear next.

**Fears Concerning the Standards and Quality of Education**

The fears concerning the standards and quality of education because of the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction stem from the fact that many students, teachers and parents have been made to believe that *English is equivalent to education*. To such people, without English the education that is offered cannot merit international standards and the forces of globalization. They would rather see the students being taught in broken, incomprehensible English than in Kiswahili which is understandable and can be manipulated by both the teachers and students.

I have, in another paper insisted that the right to education is a democratic and legal right. Furthermore, true emancipation, self reliance and poverty alleviation go hand in hand with full-rounded education that would, ultimately bring about the liberation of the mind in terms of creativity and spontaneity, aesthetic appreciation and spiritual growth; and the body with regard to essential skills and physical fitness. Since these multiple combinations can only be achieved through a language in education that both the learner and the teacher understand - a language of the cultural upbringing of the actors in education delivery, we are underscorng the simple fact that without such a language, the standards and quality of education will not be high. Through incompetence in the language of teaching/learning, and through lack of command of such a language, the standards and quality of education that would be high enough to empower the learners will always be at their lowest.
Another type of fear with regard to the language-in-education issue is that indigenous languages cannot match the English language which is considered to be the language of science and technology; in which case, this causes an additional fear of lack of employment to those who have not been taught in English. I would like to conclude the discussion in this section by stating what I have stated elsewhere with regard to the language-in-education issue. Research has clearly indicated that no country can develop and industrialise by using a foreign language for its medium of instruction in its education system. There are numerous examples of such countries, including Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Japan, Germany, Italy, and countless others. Good education is that which both the learners and the teachers are in full command. It is this kind of education that liberates the mind and the body while empowering the learners to perform technological and scientific discoveries. The use, misuse or even lack of the use of a culture to which language belongs, can have a very fundamental impact on the minds of those who would have otherwise excelled, had they been taught and required to articulate their thoughts in a language they understand, a language that they are comfortable to spontaneously and creatively express their ideas and experiences in.\(^9\) Incidentally, a Tanzanian text-book author and science teacher, Omari Mohamed Kiputiputi, has been writing a computer science text-book in Kiswahili. Furthermore, both Microsoft and Linux are already translating their systems into Kiswahili. This should allay the fears that Kiswahili is not a language of science and technology. Indeed, as Brock-Utne observes, Kiswahili is an easy language to use for electronic communication since, unlike languages like Norwegian, German and French; it does not have any other letters than those found in the English alphabet.\(^{10}\)

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\(^{10}\) See Birgit Brock-Utne,
What This Means

Since the sixties, the eighties and the nineties there have been a number of plans by the Tanzanian Government to change the medium of instruction into Kiswahili at secondary as well as tertiary levels. The plans have always been based on an analysis of the language situation in such institutions through which it was concluded that the students’ proficiency and competence in English is not good enough to have such a language as the medium of instruction. Such plans have always been due to the research findings that indicate that Tanzanian students understand much better in Kiswahili which is the language they use daily and that a change to this language as a medium of instruction is imminent. Again, a perplexing situation, similar to that by the parents, teachers and students, has always been there whereby in spite of the research outcomes and the ensuing plans, either the proposal to use Kiswahili as the medium of instruction has been put aside, or no action has been taken by the Government to put such proposal into practice.

Many scholars and researchers have argued that there is a missing link in the transition from primary to secondary education when English language is suddenly imposed as a medium of instruction. One of the objectives of Tanzania’s secondary education - that of consolidating and broadening the scope of the baseline ideas, knowledge, skills and principles required and developed at the primary school level is hampered by the abrupt use of English as a medium of instruction at secondary school level. Inversely, the researchers are saying that a foreign language as a medium of instruction can never equip a learner with the tools of grasping a subject and competently, spontaneously and creatively manipulating the articulation of the learned skills. The researchers fell short of insisting that through this state of affairs education has never liberated the majority of the school goers intellectually and culturally.
LOITASA researchers, such as Martha Qorro, have shown that education is an additive process – a process that starts from the known and proceeds towards the unknown. It is a cumulative process because what has been learnt is used as a resource of springboard in the next stage of learning. The process is also dynamic as it involves the interplay of a number of variables such as vision, skills, incentives, resources and an action plan. However, even when all these variables are in operation, no education can take place unless teachers and students understand the language used in the teaching-learning process. The LOITASA researchers, though, argue that it is important to distinguish arguments for the teaching of English as a subject, and arguments for using English as the medium of instruction. They argue further that if learning is achieved through the use of indigenous language media of instruction, as a consequence, even effective learning of English or any other foreign language will follow. As it is, right now the use of English as the medium of instruction in secondary schools in Tanzania has neither motivated students to learn the language nor has it facilitated the learning of other subjects.

Conclusions
At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to draw one basic conclusion with regard to the language-in-education issues discussed in this paper, and that concerns the necessity for the change of the mindset among teachers, parents, students, policy makers and other stakeholders of the education sector. I have stated elsewhere that this desired change is multifaceted. Sometimes it calls for renovation, or adjustment and modification. At other times it calls for a change or just deviation. Some other times such change requires some kind of transmutation. While change may involve all these, it seems to me that the most important change with regard to the issue of language of instruction in the education system in Tanzania and probably most of Africa is that of the mindset. This is the change that will ultimately resolve the perplexing results of our
research projects in which, in spite of acknowledging that it is simply useless to cling to foreign languages as our media of instruction in our schools, parents, teachers and even students and policy makers end up suggesting that we must continue using such languages. This is a change from old, colonial hangover that continues to make us an accessory to the outmoded colonial principles, ethics, and beliefs. This is a change from being held hostages of the consumerist market forces that have cleverly, like a chameleon, transformed their identity into the newly found sugar-coated, high-sounding concept of globalization. This is a concept that basically implies open and aggressive competition among nations and systems, competition even between the filthy rich and powerful and the pitifully poor and powerless. We must understand that English, like any other capitalist product, has all along been used as a very valued commodity by the British Government - at any cost. Thus, even the mushrooming so-called English medium international academies in Tanzania are part and parcel of that process of selling this commodity. Even the English Improvement Programmes championed by the British Council and the accruing and absurd recommendations from the same are part and parcel of that crafty commercial advertisement of this valued commodity by the British. Unless and until we disentangle ourselves from the claws of capitalism that have suddenly turned into globalization, we shall for ever remain enslaved and chained not only economically and politically, but more dangerously, culturally. Here is where the desired change of the mindset counts a lot. And this seems to me to be the most important and basic aspect in this debate on the language medium of instruction not only Tanzania, but in Africa in general. And, herein lies the challenge. Without overcoming such a challenge, it will be impossible to initiate the process of expanding the real freedoms that people aspire for.
Defining educational quality and equity within schools. Chapter 4: The structure of education systems and quality and equity in student performance. 47 Introduction. 48 The structure of education systems and educational differentiation. Table 6.1 Teachers with an ISCED 5A qualification in the language of assessment and quality of educational resources, by school average socio-economic status. Table 6.2 Student performance differences in reading literacy by socio-economic background, migration background and gender.