

Constraints and Challenges

After addressing the myths, several challenges still threaten the full implementation of a language policy. One major challenge is that many teachers and education officials do not fully understand the policy and view mother-tongue instruction as a step backwards. During colonization, foreign languages were imposed as the primary spoken language across Africa. Schools began teaching in English, French, Portuguese. As a result, mother-tongue was gradually removed from schools and from academic material. English took over as the primary language of instruction in Kenya and parents rarely, if ever, used mother-tongue at school. Consequently, many parents view the language of instruction policy as ill-informed and harmful. For the language policy to be dutifully implemented, parents must be educated on the importance of teaching in mother tongue and the science behind language acquisition. Stakeholders must be involved, invested, and trained at the beginning of the policy implementation plan. This support must be continuous and incorporate feedback across all levels.

Moreover, Kenya is diverse. Large urban cities, like Nairobi, are comprised of various tribes that do not share a familiar language. While the language policy states that in this case teachers should use Kiswahili as the language of instruction, not everyone speaks fluent Kiswahili. Furthermore, enough teachers cannot fluently speak their mother tongue, making it difficult to fully support their learners. Assuming a teacher is fluent in L1, there are concepts and vocabulary words that exist in English but not in the first language and vice versa. Supporting diverse learners with various familiar languages presents a challenge that would require intense planning and differentiation to ensure a full implementation of the language policy.

Implications on Our Work

Successfully Implementing the Policy

For non-state actors to successfully implement the language policy, stakeholders must fully understand it. A gradual transition to the second language will ensure that all parties internalize the policy. "Cold turkey" transitions are rarely successful as learners must gradually transition from L1 to L2. Teachers in the school must understand that they are both subject teachers and language teachers. All teachers must know how to fluently transition between the familiar language and the language of instruction – adjusting accordingly based on learner response. This requires constant borrowing of words, labeling items in several languages, and investing more time in delivering critical content elements in both languages.

Once teachers are supported and fully invested, the transition to L2 must be fully planned and supported. This includes provision of books and support materials in the language of the catchment area. Furthermore, the desired language of instruction must be well-understood and supported at all levels. Teachers must feel confident in teaching in both L1 and L2, English in Kenya. They must have a strong oral base and a deep working vocabulary. Learners must have ample opportunities to practice conversational and academic speaking in order to build their working vocabulary. Teaching in the L2 must begin when the teaching will be most effective and when clear guidelines and trainings are in place to support the transition. Subject specific books must also contain language specific developmental goals to improve the rate of content uptake and language development.

At an organizational level, all educational organizations must adapt their training to meet the needs of the locality served. Facilitators can model switching between the familiar language and English. Literacy organizations must consider translating books into the language of the catchment area. For teachers to start making this language transitions, organizations that support them must provide a ripe environment for learning and practice. While all the organizations present for both sessions do not specifically focus on language, every organization can play a role in supporting student learning and academic success across Kenya.



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EXPLORING THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

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Language of instruction is widely contested across the education community. Stakeholders, learners, and teachers often disagree on the best language to use in the classroom. Evidence suggests that the language of instruction widely predicts student success. Yet, language is oftentimes chosen hastily and without the necessary considerations. **UNESCO reports** that "as much as 40 per cent of the global population does not have access to an education in the language that they speak or understand." Unfortunately, the majority of these learners live in the Global South where linguistic diversity exists at a higher rate and poverty exacerbate these challenges.

Speaking the “Same Language”

Defining Mother Tongue-Based Instruction

In order to explore the benefits and challenges of mother tongue-based instruction, we must share a common definition. Mother tongue, or first language (L1), is the language most commonly spoken at home. Mother tongue-based instruction allows learners to learn fundamental concepts in a familiar language before introducing more complex topics in a second language of instruction (L2). When learners begin their formal education in their first language, they can more easily grasp new concepts and ideas. Furthermore, learners build confidence in speaking and reading in the language naturally spoken at home. Teachers must be fluent in the L1 in order for them to best support learners who speak that language.

Language Policy in Kenya

The language-in-education policy for basic education institutions was enacted in 1976 by the Gachathi Commission. The policy states that mother tongue should be the language of instruction in lower primary. The policy recommends the following:

- To use as a language of instruction the predominant language spoken in the schools' catchment area for the first three years of primary education.
- To introduce English as a subject from Primary 1 and to make it supersede the predominant local language as the medium of instruction in Primary 4 (Gachathi Commission, 1976, pp. 54–55)

In areas where there are many languages present, Kiswahili should be the primary language used for instruction. While the policy is relevant and well-written, it was not dutifully implemented.

Benefits of Mother Tongue-Based Instruction

Fully implementing a first language policy yields **many benefits**. Firstly, student participation increases when children are taught in their primary language. Children cannot participate if they do not understand the language. The use of L1 allows learners to contribute their thoughts and to freely engage with the material. People default to thinking in their first language, long after acquiring a second. Thus, teaching in L1 invites genuine dialogue into the classroom. This dialogical approach promotes exploration, critical thinking, and risk taking in the classroom. A participatory approach also promotes deep conceptual development and understanding. When learners understand the fundamentals of a subject in their familiar language, they can more easily grasp, with necessary scaffolds, subsequent topics in a second language.

Secondly, teaching in L1 lays a strong foundation for literacy, decoding, and fluency. Reading in a familiar language allows learners to focus on decoding without having to translate simultaneously. The use of a familiar language in the classroom also promotes community engagement. Parents feel more comfortable supporting their children with schoolwork when they can speak the language of instruction. This prevents learners and parents from feeling alienated – resulting in lower dropout rates, higher parental engagement, and improved student learning outcomes.

Roadblocks to Implementation

Myths to Address

Despite the many benefits, not all stakeholders believe that mother-tongue based instruction is advantageous and parents share common misconceptions around the use of L1 in schools. One common myth is that teaching children in their familiar language will make it harder to switch to a second language. Many believe that the more time a child spends speaking the second language, the faster he will learn the language. However, **studies show** that learners struggle to master a second language when they have not yet mastered their primary language. When learners have a strong mastery in L1, their language skills and understanding will transfer to the acquisition of L2, a strategy called linguistic interdependence. When L1 is sufficiently and intentionally developed as a subject and the language of instruction, it facilitates the learning of the second language.

A second myth is that younger children can automatically learn a second language quickly and easily. The myth stems from the '**Critical Learning Period**' hypothesis, the idea that at a young age, the brain is rapidly growing and building its neuro networks. While the theory holds, it has been challenged in relation to second language learning. Learners being taught in L2 feel an immense social and psychological pressure to learn the language. However, in the absence of deep understanding, the student will memorize information when necessary and then quickly forget it. While the best time to learn a second language is when one is younger, the second language must be used and taught in the same manner as the first.

Finally, a third common myth, is that when a child can speak a second language, they have fully mastered the language. Language acquisition is a multi-step process: hearing, speaking, and understanding. **Jim Cummins** put forward a very important distinction relevant to language competence.

1. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)
2. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

The first competence, BICS, refers to the common language used to communicate. For example, the ability to discuss a television program or to order a meal. Basic interpersonal communication skills are routinely developed through daily conversations, cultural exposure, or environmental print. The second, however, is more complex. CALP refers to the academic vocabulary one needs to understand complex ideas: describing gravity, dividing fractions, or justifying democracy. Academic language requires a strong foundation of basic communication skills. Therefore, if a student can hold a conversation about her weekend in her L1, this does not mean that she will understand a lesson on the Pythagorean theorem in the same language.