

Language in Education Policy in Kenya: What Place for Foreign Languages?

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Abstract: The subject of Language-in-education policies has generated rigorous debate and is an issue of concern to education stakeholders and researchers in education. Despite markedly disparate views, there is an uneasy agreement that for education systems the world over, languages play a pivotal role in the teaching and learning processes. This paper provides a critical appraisal of the general language-in-education-policy in Kenya (hereinafter, LiEP). It then briefly and singularly examines foreign language-in-education policies (hereinafter, FLiEP) around the world and gives a particular focus on the situation of the French language education in Kenya. The paper determines that foreign language-in-education policies in Kenya's education system are admittedly silent or not clearly spelt-out. The resultant effect on foreign language education (hereinafter, FLE) in Kenyan schools is that its growth has not been methodologically planned but have "self-developed" in response and in line with socio-economic, political and educational transformations in the country. To bring this to the fore, this paper presents an explanatory research by critically examining Kenya's LiEP from independence to present, their interpretations and implementations, in reference to foreign language education. Literature informing this paper was sourced from various documents from library search, online sources and Ministry of Education Kenya documents, that is, Sessional Papers.

Keywords: Foreign language-in-education policy, Kenya, language policy

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Introduction

Kenya is considered linguistically heterogeneous with over 40 languages spread across its territory (cf. Barasa, 2016a). Beyond local languages, Kiswahili is used as both the official and national language while English serves as the official language and the language of instruction in schools (Mutai, 2006). In the acts of teaching and learning, Kenya's polyphonic context raises issues, complexities and controversies in the choice and implementation of language(s) for education. The general LiEP in Kenya embraces a bilingual approach to education where the child's mother tongue (hereinafter, MT) (or relevant local languages) is used as a language of instruction (hereinafter, LOI) in lower primary classes while English is taught as a subject. In upper primary classes, English takes over from MT as the LOI (Muthwii, 2002).

A close interrogation into LiEP in Kenya at this level reveals a language policy dilemma where English being better resourced language, the child using MT has to contend with a native language that has no room in generating school-based knowledge beyond lower primary schools. Further, English remains the dominant language in Kenya politics and commerce. Kembo-Sure and Ogechi (2009) avers that the colonial history of Kenya established English "as the most revered, powerful and prestigious language" while MT was to be used for mundane communicative needs. They further point out that independent language policy in education firmly entrenched the old colonial pattern to the extent that MT is used as a medium of instruction and taught as a subject for only three years of an individual school career. In fact, Ambiyio (2017) attests to the fact that Kenya does not have one comprehensive document on language policy per se but there are provisions regarding language use in the constitution and other policies like the education policy on languages of instruction. There are also various sessional papers and reports of various education commissions, such as, the Mackay Report (1981) and Gachathi Report (1976) that have addressed language use and management over time, from the arrival of Christian missionaries in the early 20th century. These policies provide the basis for planning of issues relating to language use in the education sector.

This dilemma in language-in-education policy can be taken a step further where the presence of foreign languages (FL) in Kenya's education system is noted. This further complicates the dilemma in language practice and use to Kenya's learners and education stakeholders and this in light of LiEP.

According to the Kenya Association of Teachers of French (KATF), the number of schools where French is taught were approximately 400 and there were 30,000 learners by the year 2011 (Chokah, 2013). Currently, there are a total 3702 secondary schools offering French studies in Kenya (Directory of French Teaching in Kenya, 2019). This paper interrogates Kenya's LiEP general policy statement and their interpretations by education stakeholders. We will further explore the implications of the governments "silence" on foreign languages and lack of an appropriate balance between policy statements and practice. We begin with an overview of general language policies from independence to present. While the main focus is FL policies governing language policies in Kenya, there are also brief descriptions on language-in-education policies in Europe, the US and China.

Kenya's General Language-in-Education Policies

The place and nature of language in the area of education is one key dimension of the relationship between language and social life about which governments make such deliberate choices. This aspect of language policy is conventionally known as language-in-education policy or acquisition planning (Baldauf, 1990; Kaplan & Baldauf, 2002; Paulston & McLaughlin, 1994; Cooper, 1989). Kenya like other governments have produced specific comprehensive policies covering languages in education, however, it is more usually the case that language-in-education planning is embodied in a range of different

documents including policy papers, curriculum and assessment documents and other official documents that affect the language teaching profession.

Before further discussing LiEP in Kenya, it is important to first point out that for the most part language policies in Kenya are more pronounced in institutions such as education, legislature, mass media and the judiciary where specific languages have been earmarked for specific roles. Since this study's focus was specifically on FLiEP, it is imperative to comment briefly on the Kenyan education language policy.

From independence to present, Kenya's LiEP school policies can be characterized as explicitly based on bilingual education but in most polities, it has been observed elsewhere that the policies are only on paper (Bamgbose, 2000; Heugh, 2002; & Roy-Campbell, 2000); there is no actual implementation. Despite this impediment Mose (2017) traces the first mien of Kenya's language-in education polities for primary schools to 1976 during the enactment of Gachathi report. The commission introduced mother tongues as languages of instruction in lower primary. Previous commissions had indicated that these languages were ill-equipped to play this role (Ominde Commission, 1964). For the first time in the independent Kenya, MT was officially sanctioned and recognized by the state for use in the education system. For the purpose of this study we will briefly examine two specific recommendations:

- i. Recommendation 101: To use as a language of instruction the predominant language spoken in the schools' catchment area for the first three years of primary education.
- ii. Recommendation 102: 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).

From the above recommendations it is apparent that indigenous languages are left with peripheral roles in the education systems. Mose (2017) notes that only Tanzania has successfully used Kiswahili (which is inherently indigenous African language) in teaching content knowledge throughout the primary school level, though Zanzibar (a sister island) has just introduced the use of English to teach some content subjects from grade five, a move that contradicts diverse empirical research findings in support of the use of the mother tongue, or languages that learners know best, especially in primary education (Maalim, 2015; Qorro, 2009). He further notes that for linguistically heterogeneous areas referred to in the policy as periurban/urban or metropolitan areas, the policy states that Kiswahili should be used for instruction. Kenya is predominantly rural with many regions inhabited by specific linguistically homogeneous communities. The policy could therefore find easy implementation in this context. Justifying the use of mother tongues in early learning, the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE, 2012) states; The pupils' ideas and thoughts are in their mother tongue and will continue to be so, long after they have learnt to speak in English. To be encouraged to think for themselves, the pupils must be helped to do so in their own language (p. 147).

For the purpose of this study we will not enter further into which languages are ideal vehicles of knowledge transfer but will second Cummins (1984) idea that all languages have 'common underlying proficiency' which is a shared basic feature at the deeper level and only needs to be developed and facilitated. As such any language can be used to achieve sophistication in any sphere of life. Fishman (1968) sums this by arguing that there is nothing in the composition of any language that impedes it from becoming a channel of modern enlightenment.

It is for this reason that because of the impact of local languages in the overall teaching and learning processes, their use is entrenched in the Kenyan constitution of 2010 as stipulated in chapter 2, section

7(3) which notes the commitment of the state to: promote and protect the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya and to promote the development and use of indigenous languages.

Awuor (2019) observes however that despite the benefits that accrue from the use of local languages, they have not been given the attention they deserve in the Kenyan context in particular and the African continent generally. She further goes on to state that most education systems in the African continent give precedence to international languages despite the fact that the number of those fluent in these languages is minimal. The use of such languages in the education system pose far reaching consequences because there is a disconnect between what is formally taught and its applicability in its social domain. The fact that the policy as currently conceived is not properly implemented as indicated by various research reports (Mbaabu, 1996; Mose, 2015). For the policy to be successfully and fully implemented, there is need for all education stakeholders to understanding the meaning and implications to the policy of following key concepts is important: (a) peri-urban/urban/metropolitan areas, (b) the place of mother tongues in learning and concept formation, (c) language predominance, (d) language of the catchment, and (e) the overall principle underlying the language-in-education policy requirement.

While the significance and interplay between English and local languages in the education system cannot be overlooked, it is worth noting that there are other significant languages in Kenya's education system which may easily go unnoticed, yet they may have overarching consequences for the social, political and economic development of the country, this is the case of foreign languages or otherwise referred to as other international languages. This as we will see later in this paper forms the crux and the basis of what we will refer to as the first quandary of foreign language education in Kenya. It is to be noted that there is a difference in the terms "second" and "foreign" language. In this study foreign language is used throughout in the sense of an international language learned by an individual in Kenya other than English and Kiswahili. It will also be important to adopt the more widely accepted definition in the area of foreign language teaching/learning that posits that a foreign language is that which is acquired by those to whom it is not their mother-tongue in a formal education set-up through a process that is more or less voluntary (Cuq & Graca, 2003:94). This will therefore mean that French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, etc are foreign languages in Kenya and any interested persons can learn one or more of these languages in formal school/college/university settings that exist in Kenya.

Role of Foreign Languages in Language Education

Mulinge (2006) notes the importance of multilingual education and linguistic diversity where languages are use in an education system as a means of transmitting knowledge and in enabling people to adapt to the changing world. Toriswold (2008) points at the need of the construction of an education system capable of preparing humanity to live progressively and meaningfully in the shifting modern society. In the 21st century, the demands for globalization require citizens to be equipped in more than one language through which they can have access to modern knowledge, technology and science. Collins (2007) has shown that among the United States population, there is a rising demand to learn FL and explore national borders.

In Europe and over the last decades countries have seen the establishment and development of both European and national policies on foreign language learning and teaching policies with singular focus on the pedagogical reflexion on curricular issues and generally on how to teach languages and foreign languages particularly. To achieve this Caperruci (2017) points out that for any good educational policy actions, careful planning and review of many variables (contextual, educational, organizational, emotional, relational...) that accompany the teaching - learning educational relationship. Further

educational policies require the activation of intellectual, operational, relational and technical resources aimed at “translating” specific visions of the world and human beings into instructional actions. The following are some countries that have not only incorporated FLE in their education systems but have seen the need to clearly spell-out the place of FLs in their overall education policy and planning.

The Kenyan Experience

To bring to the fore policy issues in Kenya with regard to foreign language education, we will first examine the concept of language policy through a political approach. In a general and a simplistic approach, language policy refers to rules set by authorities to govern the acquisition and/or use of languages. Some policy makers and analysts have used the term to apply to a wide variety of administrative levels ranging from international organizations (e.g. Van Els 2001); to world regions (e.g. Extra & Gorter 2001); countries (Van Els 1990; Lo Bianco 1987), to single educational institutions (Clyne 2001). Cunningham and Hatoss (2005) take an expanded approach to include the following domains: corpus policy or the specification of the proper form a particular language should take; status policy or the appropriate ranking of particular languages; and foreign language policy which is concerned with the role and acquisition of languages based outside a country or region. While these domains are conceptually distinct, in practice they may overlap in their different usages.

For the purpose of this study we will take BIANCO’s “political scope” of language policy where he defines the field as “a situated activity, whose specific history and local circumstances influence what is regarded as a language problem, and whose political dynamics determine which language problems are given policy treatment.” Reference is made here to what government does either officially through legislation, court decisions or policy to determine how languages are used to cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or to establish the rights of individuals or groups to use and maintain languages. Language policies may then be divided into various types:

1. Minority protection models based on ethnic mobilization (securization) (e.g GIDS by Fishman (1991):

This applies for example to many countries in Western Europe and the Americas which in all their language practices consider themselves as essentially monolingual. Consequently, in linguistically homogeneous countries, the principal focus of language policy has been on corpus planning, the management of the national language itself, supplemented in some countries notably France, Germany, and Japan by efforts to export the national language abroad. But within the “nationalistic” language policies are those policies that are tailored to what Cunningham & Hatoss (2005) refers to as the protection of linguistic minorities against the absorptive effects of the dominant national language. Dickson & Cumming (1996), Extra & Gorter (2001), Fishman (1999), Fishman (2001), Cunningham and Hatoss (2005) use such terms such as threatened, dying, endangered languages and at the extreme, language death and linguistic genocide. Examples of such minorities are the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland, the Sami in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia, and the Celtic language communities in Ireland, Great Britain, and France. Covenants charters resolutions have been spelt by international bodies to buffer the rights and aspirations of such susceptible groups. Cases in point are The European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages, a Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities, The Hague Recommendation Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities, and the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights.

2. *Language ecology models for indigenous peoples (Muhhausler, 1995, Maffi 2001):*

Where indigenous languages with limited social existence are secured by having an elaborate language policy which protects its functional environment.

3. *Nation-building models (which are applied within state framework):*

Here concrete attempts are made to solve language problems through a rational systematic planning with a focus on building the state as a sovereign unit (nation-building, strengthening congruence between state, language and nation). This can be said of Kenya's case and specifically since independence period where with its polyphonic linguistic nature, Kenya has tried to strike a balance between global language aspirations and the country's quest for national building through legislative and social language engineering. This is evidenced through the interplay between English, Kiswahili and indigenous languages on Kenya's pronouncements on its general language policies. The quandary here being maintaining and fostering Kiswahili as a unifying language while promoting English as a language of globalization.

4. *Laissez – faire policy (Philipson, 2003):*

Where language planning issues are treated as secondary. As noted by Siiner (2010) observation on Denmark's government "liberal" or hands – off attitude towards language policies, the language situation is largely left to self –regulation, where market forces rule in the context of globalization and the survival of a language or a dialect is dictated by its market value. The latest studies in Kenya on language attitudes reveal the high status of English vs Kiswahili, indigenous languages and foreign languages (e.g. Barasa, 2016a; 2016b). This because English language education is viewed as a means to further economic and financial success in the global market. These asymmetries between English and "other" languages in Kenya is pointed out by Muaka (2011, p.4) in his recent study on language perceptions in Kenya, he determines that Kenya's local languages are marginalized and viewed as impediments to people's success in education by teachers who serve as government agents. This despite that these languages serve important roles in religious and community development projects. He further avers that at the local level, local languages facilitate administrative work which is carried out by local leaders such as the village headman, the sub chief and chief. It is important to note that without Kenya's indigenous languages, official policies would not be implemented. Unfortunately, these important roles are taken for granted and Kenya's local languages continue to be marginalized in public domains.

In regard to language-in-education policies, the cogency of the debate reveals a worrying tendency of Kenya to favor "laissez-faire" policy attitude where we observe a complete vacuum of defined guidelines on the teaching and learning of FL. In principle, the status of FL has not been ratified by law. Based on the foregoing, it can be argued that FLE in Kenya has been placed at the periphery by what Hatori (2005: 45) refers to as English linguistic imperialism. Where the world is characterized by "inequality" where power is maintained at the center by major English-speaking countries and the periphery occupied by other international languages. To avoid future language power struggles in Kenya's language scene and in particular in regard to language-in-education policies, there is an urgent need for discursive construction of FL engagement in all spheres of learning processes and the resultant emergence of an explicit language policy. Consequently, the absence of an explicit FLE policy raises pertinent issues about general education situation in Kenya this despite government's efforts to foster more and better FL learning through various initiatives.

This study has established that there is not a single, unified curriculum of foreign languages with transparent statements about why some languages are included and others excluded. The fact that only a few widely used international languages like French, German and Spanish are offered in schools and that

other languages are excluded from school curricula, is not a result of policy but of commonsensical ad hoc decisions, made by Ministers of Education as is the case of the current secondary school curriculum, implemented in 1986 and revised in 1992 and 2002, respectively, spells out four main objectives for teaching French. These are to:

...equip learners with communicative skills for effective communication where French is required; give the learners access to oral and written material in French; facilitate further studies in Francophone institutions; and promote global understanding through the understanding and appreciation of the cultures of French-speaking peoples. (Kenya Institute of Education, 2002).

Parents', students' and teachers' expectations with regard to foreign language literacy are still dominated by privately owned foreign language centers and schools everywhere in Kenya. They offer foreign language instruction which can be accessed exclusively by middle- and higher-level-income economic classes. In such language centers and schools particularly those in the urban areas, additional languages of economic importance are beginning to be offered, such as Korean and Chinese. To manage these language processes, there is certainly need for politically motivated pronouncements and governmental decrees, state regulations and consciously planned actions reflecting efforts to integrate decisions about foreign language and language use with higher level laws and with the constitution. Such needed paradigm shifts should be deliberately stated and implemented.

Conclusion

The discussion has brought to the fore Kenya's quest and struggle between nation building and globalization through the enactment of language policies at various times into the national educational system. Many reviews of language education policy failed to recognize the presence of foreign languages in the country's linguistic repertoire and in its policy frameworks. Questions still remain on whether the goal of vision 2030 can be achieved as desired where globalization part of its target goals. The FLiEP discourse is critical and is bound to remain for a long time especially in the developing countries. Our preceding discussion clearly illustrates the need for more research to investigate and document FLiEP in order to entrench FL in general policy frameworks and implementation.

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