

Primary School Leavers' English Skills and their Adequacy for Knowledge Acquisition at Secondary School: The Case of Iringa Municipality¹

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Abstract

This study presents an account of how primary school leavers' level of English literacy affects their learning in English at secondary education level. It adopts CALLA², which is an instructional model for second/foreign language learners. A total of 40 Form I students in 4 secondary schools were sampled for the study. To obtain the data, 5-minute passage reading and 30-minute writing of their short history in English were used. One interesting finding is that 10/28 (35.7%) Form I students with SM³ background who were assigned to write their short history in English could neither complete nor write comprehensively. Again, when they were given a reading task, 8/28 (28.6%) could not complete and were apparently unable to read the text. Conversely, 12/12 (100%) Form I students with EM⁴ background who were tested for writing were able to complete writing their comprehensible short history texts, and all 12/12 (100%) who were assigned a reading task completed reading with clear comprehension. It was, therefore, concluded that there were problems associated with ELT⁵ in SM primary schools.

Keywords: *English literacy, medium of knowledge acquisition, adequacy, primary school leavers*

Introduction

In Tanzania, the Swahili language is the medium of instruction in primary schools, and English is only taught as a compulsory academic subject at this level (with the exception of a few English-medium primary schools (MoEC, 1995). Many pupils in both rural and urban areas come from families where Swahili and ethnic community languages are predominantly spoken. However, currently, some children mainly from

¹ This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Mkwawa University College of Education Staff-student Seminar on Thursday, 22nd May, 2014. Data for this study were collected in May and July, 2013 from Schools selected from Iringa Municipality. Many thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for constructive comments and very useful suggestions.

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² CALLA is a short form for Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach.

³ SM is a short form for Swahili Medium.

⁴ EM is a short form for English Medium.

⁵ ELT is a short form for English Language Teaching.

well-to-do families, especially in urban areas, are sent to English medium primary schools.

For more than three decades now, educators, teachers, civil societies, human right activists, and other well-wishers in Tanzania have been complaining about the level of literacy acquired by pupils during their primary education. This is especially so in public Swahili medium primary schools where the majority of pupils attend. In this regard, some studies also report that the levels of literacy in both the Swahili and English languages have been falling dramatically, leading to the churning out of primary school leavers who can neither read nor write a basic story in either of the two languages (cf. Uwezo, 2012, 2011; Qorro, 2008; Roy-Campbell & Qorro, 1997).

In this paper, medium of instruction means a language used to transfer knowledge from an instructor/teacher to a learner mainly in teaching and learning situations. Its role is equated with that of a copper wire that carries and transmits electricity from one point of the grid-line to another. Cognitive psychologists in education say that a child will learn better in the language he/she is familiar with. This implies that any medium of instruction should be the one that most learners are familiar with (Qorro, 2005; 2008; 2010). The current study confined itself to reading and writing (*conventional literacy*) because the two language skills are crucial for Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) of the learner in the acquisition of the knowledge stored not only in print but also in spoken discourse. However, although a lot of talking and listening is done in the classroom, it is only essential for facilitating interpersonal communication and not necessarily academic. This is, in fact, what Saville-Troike calls Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) as opposed to CALP (cf. Saville-Troike, 2006).

This study investigated the adequacy of using English literacy as the medium of knowledge acquisition amongst Form I students with SM background and compared them with those with EM background at early stages of their secondary education using Iringa Municipality as a case study. To achieve the objectives, two pertinent questions were used:

- (i) To what extent are the primary school leavers in Tanzania English literate?
- (ii) How does the level of English language literacy acquired by primary school leavers in Tanzania affect their learning in English at secondary education?

Literature Review

Various studies (e.g., Mlama and Matteredu, 1977; Mvungi 1982; Criper and Dodd, 1984; Simmonds *et al.*, 1991; Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1997; Kadege, 2000, 2003; Brock-Utne, 2004, 2005, 2007; Galabawa and Lwaitama, 2005; Galabawa and Senkoro, 2006; Bryne, 2006; Qorro, 1999, 2005, 2008, 2010) conducted in Tanzania so far raise concerns on the debate about which language should be a medium of instruction at secondary education in Tanzania: Swahili, English or both. Although these studies (e.g., Qorro, 2010:10) admit that the level of English language proficiency in Tanzania secondary schools is 'totally inadequate for use in the learning of other subjects, yet they do not examine the level of the English language *literacy*⁶ acquired by the primary school leavers who join secondary education, and how it may affect their post-primary learning. Below is a summary of the key studies reviewed:

Studies by Mlama and Matteredu (1977), Mvungi (1982), Criper and Dodd (1984), Simmonds *et al.* (1991), and Roy-Campbell and Qorro (1997) found that there was a continued challenge of using a foreign language as a medium of instruction at secondary education to the majority of Tanzanian learners. These studies also challenge the way the English language is generally taught. Thus, the focal point inherited in these studies is to trigger language policy change. However, the current study presents the evidence that would enhance English literacy teaching in primary schools for the development of the learners' Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), particularly when learning is done in a foreign language. The current study, therefore, seeks to provide a comparative analysis between Form I students with EM background and those with SM background in order to propose intervention, and accordingly trigger improved learning and teaching of the language, rather than throwing it out of the window.

Again, Bryne (2006) shows that in Tanzania the level of the English language has been fluctuating since the 1920s. This, according to Bryne (*ibid.*), is because of, among others, changes of both teachers and English language syllabuses to match the adopted policy of education imposed before and after independence. In his report, Bryne also argues that during the pre-colonial era English was taught by native speakers in middle schools but after Tanganyika (now Tanzania Mainland) attained independence in 1961, English was taught by African teachers who

⁶ '*Literacy*' refers to the ability to *read* and *write* correctly in a particular language; such as Swahili, English, German, French, Swedish, etc. In some disciplines; especially pedagogy, '*Literacy*' includes *numeracy* (the ability to count numbers correctly). However, in this paper, the term '*Literacy*' is used to refer to the learner's ability to 'read' and comprehend a *text*, and to 'write' correctly a *passage* about what he/she knows in the English language.

acquired the language from the native speakers. According to Bryne, these teachers are now *old* and many of them have retired, thus, the present low level of English proficiency in primary school leavers in Tanzania is mainly attributable to the fact that many English language teachers are young, non-native and have very low English proficiency. However, according to the report, despite the fact that English is badly taught in primary schools, Bryne (*ibid.*) does not show how the level of English language proficiency acquired by primary school leavers may affect their post-primary learning in the language as classes are currently made up of students with EM and SM backgrounds.

Furthermore, other studies conducted in Tanzania present findings on the assessment of general language literacy in education, particularly of Kiswahili among primary school leavers, the youth, adults and the general public (Polome & Hill, 1980; Rubagumya, 1990, 1994; Pithis, 2000-2005; Mulkeen, 2005, 2006; Bhalalusesa, 2008). However, these studies, do not question the English language literacy (*reading and writing*) acquired by primary school leavers, and its adequacy for use as a medium of knowledge acquisition in print material in secondary education and the differential pace in learning between Form I students in one classroom but with two different language medium backgrounds.

Theoretical Approach

This study adopts the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) to guide the analysis and discussion of the findings relating to the problem under investigation. CALLA is an instructional model for second and foreign language learners based on the cognitive theory and research. CALLA was developed by American Summer Institute in 2006 to meet the academic needs of students learning in English as *a second language* and/or *foreign language* (source: <http://nclrc.org>). CALLA integrates instruction in priority topics from the content curriculum, the development of the language skills needed for learning in school, and explicit instruction in using learning strategies for academic tasks. CALLA aims to make students learn essential academic content and language; and to become independent and self-regulated learners through their increasing command over a variety of strategies for learning in school. CALLA aims at assisting students essentially in:

- valuing their own prior knowledge and cultural experiences, and relating this knowledge to academic learning in a new language and culture;
- learning the content knowledge and the language skills that are most important for their future academic success;
- developing language awareness and critical literacy;

- selecting and using appropriate learning strategies and study skills that will develop academic knowledge and processes;
- learning through hands-on, inquiry-based, and cooperative learning tasks;
- increasing motivation for academic learning and confidence in their ability to be successful in school; and,
- evaluating their own learning and planning how to become more effective and independent learners.

Justification of the Approach

It is said that using a *Second language* or *foreign language* as a medium of instruction increases exposure to learners as it promotes the acquisition of its proficiency, and that it develops divergent thinking and cognitive academic abilities (cf. Kadege, 2000; 2003). Therefore, investigating *English Language Literacy (ELL)* does not refute this claim, but mainly seeks to find out the extent of the *ELL* acquired by primary school leavers, and the way it may affect the Learners' Cognitive Academic Language Learning, knowledge acquisition and creation regarding the multi-linguistic backgrounds learners hold upon joining secondary education in Tanzania. As per this model, using an L2/FL in teaching and learning other subjects provides opportunities for learning the language in question, and it can make learners develop divergent thinking, critically argue and access knowledge that is stored in the language, especially if it is well taught in elementary and primary levels of education. Again, using an L2/FL develops language awareness, and critical literacy through an increased exposure. However, this requires a huge investment in terms of qualified human resource, facilities, infrastructure, motivation and a relevant policy.

Methodology

Four (4) secondary schools in Iringa Municipality (two private and two public) were sampled for the study based on their history in academic performance and the type of students they admit. They were: Iringa Girls' Secondary School (public), Highland Secondary School (private), Lugalo Secondary School (public) and Spring Valley Secondary School (private). In each school, ten (10) Form I students who were randomly sampled were tested. Thus, each Form I student in each school had an equal chance to participate or to be picked based on the language medium background. Out of the ten (10) students from each school, three (3) were from English Medium Primary Schools (EMPS), and seven (7) were from Swahili Medium Primary Schools (SMPS). Students with EM background were few in all the schools selected. Thus, each student involved in the study was tested and observed in the classroom during the teaching and learning of English and other subjects. This was done in order to determine the

adequacy of the level of English literacy acquired by primary school leavers who join secondary education through *reading* and *writing* as they interacted with their teachers and materials. Generally, the overall results were obtained using two *Model tests*, viz: A 5-minute *passage reading* and 30-minute *short history writing* for testing *comprehension* and *accuracy*. To obtain pertinent information, through reading, each student tested was asked to suggest a possible title for the passage after reading it. *Participant observation* was also done to determine student-teacher and learner-material interactions in the acquisition of knowledge of the subjects taught and presented in English prints in subjects such as Civics, Geography, History, Physics, and Chemistry.

Results

The results obtained from four (4) secondary schools were as follows: in school A: only 3 out of 7 Form I students from Swahili medium primary schools could complete writing their *short histories* in 30 minutes but with errors in word choice, spelling and punctuation. The other four (4) did not complete the *short histories* even when they were given more time. In the same school, 2 out of 3 Form I students who were from English medium primary schools completed writing their *short histories* in the first twenty (20) minutes and the rest within 28 minutes. In both cases, only a few errors in spelling and punctuation emerged. On reading a *model English passage* for *five minutes* by each student in the sample, 5 out of 7 Form I students who were from SMPS⁷ completed reading the passage within the timeframe but with poor pronunciation and low comprehension. The other two did not finish on time. They were seemingly unable to read a text in English. By contrast, all three (3) Form I students from EMPS completed reading the passage within 3-4 minutes with a few pronunciation errors but with a good comprehension.

In school B, the results revealed that 5 out of 7 Form I students from SMPS completed writing their *short histories* in 30 minutes with errors in word choice, spelling and punctuation. The other two (2) could not complete the task. In the same school, all three (3) Form I students who were from EMPS⁸ completed writing their *short histories* within the first twenty five (25) minutes with a few errors in spelling and punctuation. On reading the passage for five minutes, 4 out of 7 Form I students who were from SMPS completed reading within the time specified but with poor pronunciation and low comprehension of the passage; only 2 out of 4 got the title right. The other three (3) could not finish within the time specified. On the other hand, all (3) Form I students from EMPS completed reading the passage

⁷ SMPS abbreviation for Swahili Medium Primary Schools

⁸ EMPS abbreviation for English Medium Primary Schools

within 3 minutes with a few pronunciation errors but with good comprehension as all three were able to identify the title after reading the passage.

In school C, 6 out of 7 Form I students from SMPS completed writing their *short histories* in 30 minutes with a few errors in word choice, spelling and punctuation. Only one (1) could not complete the task. In the same school, all three (3) Form I students from EMPS completed writing their *short histories* within the first twenty two (22) minutes but with a few errors in spelling. However, these showed a fairly good use of punctuation. On reading for *five minutes*, 5 out of 7 Form I students from SMPS completed reading the passage within the time specified but with low comprehension; only 2 out of 5 could identify the title of the passage. The other two (2) could not finish on time. On the other hand, all (3) Form I students from EMPS completed reading the passage within 3-4 minutes with a good comprehension of the passage because all could identify the title.

In school D, 4 out of 7 Form I students from SMPS completed writing their *short histories* in 30 minutes with considerable errors in word choice, spelling and punctuation. The other three (3) could not complete their task. In the same school, all three (3) Form I students from EMPS completed writing their *short histories* within the first twenty seven (27) minutes with a few errors in word choice, spelling and punctuation. On reading the *passage* for *five minutes*, 6 out of 7 Form I students from SMPS completed within the time specified but with poor pronunciation. Besides, they showed a good comprehension of the passage; 3 out of 6 who completed reading could identify the title of the passage. One (1) student could not finish within the time specified. By contrast, all (3) Form I students from EMPS completed reading the passage within 3-4 minutes with a few pronunciation errors but with a good comprehension of the passage; all got the title right.

During a classroom observation, it was also revealed in all the schools that Form I students joining secondary education with a Swahili medium background had difficulty following the lesson when compared with those who had an English medium background. The latter participated more in answering and asking questions than the former; they were more confident than their counterparts. It was also noted in the classroom that some teachers teaching subjects other than English in secondary schools had a poor command of the English language. Some teachers were more often code mixing as they clarified points during the lessons because a point could not come out clearly when explained in English only.

Discussion and Interpretation of the Findings

The findings indicate that public primary school education in Tanzania does not build the English literacy competence of the primary school leavers who join secondary education so that they may cope with learning in English. This is because 10 out of 28 (36%) students could neither complete nor write in English what could be deciphered. This might imply that 10 in every 28 Form I students who join secondary education from SMPS do not learn as much as they should at secondary school because of low English literacy. They could write but one could not make sense of what they wrote. Even those who completed writing their *short histories* within the time specified (i.e., 18/28 [64%]) produced many errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation, thereby producing illegible texts that they themselves could not read and make sense of. Most of these learners could not take notes correctly during the lesson. Also, when they were asked to write in English, about what they knew, they failed. Therefore, English as the language of written materials and instruction is more of a barrier than a means of acquiring knowledge (cf. Roy-Campbell & Qorro, 1997).

On the other hand, the findings show that all 12 out of 12 (100%) students who were from EMPS were able to complete writing their *short histories* on time in all four (4) schools sampled. Their story texts were more comprehensible than those written by the students with the Swahili medium background. This, by contrast, implies that Form I students joining secondary education from EMPS are well prepared to cope with studies at secondary education where English is the medium of learning in both spoken and written materials. Therefore, these learners, in principle, learn without much difficulty at this level, as they are familiar with the medium of learning. Through the writing tests, it was learnt that these learners could write fairly with a good command of English literacy (cf. Rugemalira, 2005). This conceivably implies that, in Tanzania, there exist two kinds of learners based on their medium backgrounds as classrooms are consist of learners from these backgrounds (cf. Neke, 2003), and this perpetuates inequality, with regard to access to quality secondary education. That is to say, Form I students joining secondary education from EMPS are more favoured by the medium of learning in secondary education than those who join secondary education from SMPS. This was evident when the students with EM background actively participated in classroom discussion and followed the lessons, while those with SM background were unable to follow the lessons more actively.

Again, on reading an *English model passage* within 5 minutes, the results show that 8 out of 28 (29%) Form I students with SM background, who were tested, could not complete the task within the time specified, and

were apparently unable to read a text in English. This, again, suggests that 8 in every 28 students joining secondary education with SM background cannot comprehend fully a text written in English in secondary education; thus, their pace of learning is extremely slow when compared to that of Form I students with EM background. Even those 20 out of 28 (71%) from the same group, who read the text within the time specified, had problems comprehending the text; only 8/20 identified the right title of the text. The rest could not successfully figure out what the text was all about. By contrast, all 12 out of 12 (100%) Form I students with EM background completed the reading task within less than five minutes with clear comprehension of the text given. This, again, suggests that students who join secondary education with EM background have a greater chance to succeed in secondary education than those with SM background. This perpetuates inequality in terms of access to quality secondary education, especially in the initial stages in Tanzania.

These findings have, therefore, shed light into one of the issues haunting the teaching and learning process in Tanzania secondary schools, with reference to Iringa Municipality. That is, primary school leavers joining secondary education are linguistically divided into two types: those with SM background (*majority*) and those with EM background (*minority*) but in the same country. The findings have also shown that this linguistic background difference has brought about two major consequences. On the one hand, it has brought a *learning gap*. That is, many secondary school students who join secondary education with SM background struggle much or sometimes lag behind in their initial stages of secondary education because of the unfamiliar *medium of learning* in both written and spoken discourses. This was evident for the students with SM background during observations in Form I classrooms, where a learning gap was evidently revealed as students with SM background were unable to talk about the subject matter in the *medium (language) of learning* when compared with those with EM background.

However, anecdotal evidence suggests that students with EM background have an advantage in the first or second year of study in secondary schools but eventually the SM pupils catch up as they get to understand the English language and in the end they do even better than the others. There are also claims that, in primary schools, pupils taught in Swahili understand other subjects better than those taught in English. The claims also suggest that when other factors remain constant (i.e. facilities, teachers, motivation, etc.), pupils taught in Swahili medium at primary education understand other subjects better at secondary education than those taught in English in primary schools, with a relatively good performance at in the Form Four Examination.

On the other hand, the findings present the newly created *inequality regarding access to quality* education in initial stages. That is, the English language, which is the *medium of learning* in both written and spoken discourses at secondary education in Tanzania, has been allowed to divide learners in terms of the pace of learning, instead of playing the role of transferring knowledge equally to all learners in all stages of secondary education. This tendency is even getting worse as we witness a mushrooming of English Medium Primary schools for the 'haves'⁹ to send their children because the fees in these schools too exorbitant for the 'have not'¹⁰ to afford. Therefore, in Tanzania because of this education planning, many primary school pupils, especially those from poor families, find themselves in public Swahili medium primary schools where their parents can at least afford the fees. However, experience has also shown that in EM primary schools the basic ingredient is only the *medium of instruction*; when, in fact, it is normally the *resources available in a school and management* that matter. It has also been the case that, although comparatively English is common to both 'good' private secondary schools and public secondary schools, there are huge gaps in the resources available in the two categories of schools and the way they are managed.

The findings in the current study may partly be in support of or different from those in previous research studies (e.g. Kadedghe, 2000, 2003; Qorro, 2005, 2008, 2010). For example, Kadedghe's (2003) study reported that students' ability to study in Kiswahili only was poor in secondary schools just as it was when only English was used. On the other hand, Qorro (2006, 2008, 2010) generally and strongly argues for change of Language of Instruction (LOI) from English to *Kiswahili* at all levels of education in Tanzania and to teach English as an academic subject. However, Kadedghe (ibid.) recommends for the use of both Kiswahili and English, that is, a mixture of the two languages in what he calls *code-switching* at secondary education, the position also adopted in the current National Education and Training Policy (MoETV, 2014). But, essentially, their major concern is about which language/model should be the best medium of instruction in the Tanzania education system. Therefore, the current study sought to present findings based on comparing the English literacy competence acquired by EM pupils and SW pupils who meet in one classroom at secondary education and its effect on their pace of learning. This was, however, due to the belief that there is a positive relationship between the learners' English Language Proficiency (ELP) and their academic performance, as reported in Wilson and Komba (2012). In fact, in their study, they argue that the growth of ELP makes correlates with academic

⁹ The 'haves' means the rich, people with money.

¹⁰ The 'have not' means the poor, people without enough money.

achievements. This means that the more proficient in English a student is, the better s/he is in academics (ibid.:9).

Conclusions and Recommendation

As stated in the background, this paper aimed at shedding light on what Form I students, both from *Swahili* and *English* 'medium' *primary schools* are doing in secondary schools to improve the learning of English. The findings have shown that, in Tanzania, there are problems relating to the way English is taught and used especially in public Swahili medium primary schools, as evidenced by the abilities of the subjects involved in this study. It was also discovered that many primary school leavers joining secondary education from *Swahili medium* primary schools do not have adequate English language literacy competence for them to learn and acquire knowledge through the language in their initial stages of secondary education.

In contrast, students joining secondary education from *English medium* primary schools displayed a relatively better ability to learn and acquire knowledge in English when English is used as the *medium of learning* at this level. However, it was noted that the understanding of other subjects by students with EM background may be surpassed by those with SM background at the end of Form Four. Therefore, to a large extent, the level of *English literacy* acquired by pupils with SM background does not correspond with their success in *learning through English*, especially in their initial stages of secondary education in Tanzania. *English Language Teaching* should, therefore, be strengthened in public Swahili medium primary schools and careful selection of language of instruction model(s) should be done as well. Although the government has recently launched the Education and Training policy (cf. MoEVT, 2014), implementation strategies, investment and the feasibility of the policy are still uncertain. Neither does the policy address the root cause of the problem of the language of instruction.

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