

LANGUAGE PROBLEMS IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN TANZANIA

WITH FOCUS ON THE PLACE OF ENGLISH IN TANZANIA'S

EDUCATION SYSTEM

By

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INTRODUCTION

It is very common today, in Tanzania, to hear people saying that our educational standard has fallen. One of the criteria they use is poor spoken and written English by school leavers, especially, secondary school leavers. It is difficult to deny the claim by the public that the standard of English in Tanzania schools has been falling tremendously. Although it is not the only measure of a falling standard of education, language poverty can be one of the major contributors. It is language which facilitates communication of ideas as well as development and expression of thought. I believe that the higher institutions of learning in our country introduced Communication Skills course in the early nineteen eighties, as a reaction to the bitter fact that the standard of English has fallen. At the University level, there is, in addition, the Screening Test which is administered to all First Year Students. Those who score very low marks have to undergo an Intensive Grammar Programme.

From the introductory notes on Communication Skills Course for 1985/86 First Year Students, CL 100, I learned that the objectives of the course are: to improve students language skills so that they may learn more efficiently through the medium of English, and communicate more effectively in their specialist subjects; to extend their skills of listening to lectures, taking notes from lectures and books, and organizing written work. In the years back such things were not needed at all.

Even secondary school teachers themselves complain about the low standard of English of their pupils. Many times one gets so stuck that one has to use Kiswahili to explain important points. What many pupils do is to memorize points, definitions and facts. This makes it relatively difficult for the teacher to give questions with real implied meaning, questions needing inferences and wide self expression. Not only the teachers of other subjects taught in English complain, but also, the English language teachers.

What led to such a situation? There is a number of problem areas which have something to contribute to the whole situation. For example, the place of English in Tanzania education system; reading competence in English; teaching English as a subject viz-a-vis teaching English as a medium of instruction; teaching reading skills in Secondary schools; availability of reading materials; readability of the available materials and so forth. This paper focuses on problems arising from the place of English in Tanzanian education system, and gives suggestions on how to do away with the problems.

THE PLACE OF ENGLISH IN TANZANIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

In order to see clearly the place of English in the Tanzanian education system today and appreciate the language problems in secondary school education arising from it, it is important that we look at it historically. This means that we should follow its trend from the times when English language was first introduced in the country by the British colonialists, through independence and the early years and the later years of independence, up to the present time.

The use of English language in this country started when the British colonialists took over the colony from the Germans after the First World War. They ruled the country from then until 1961 when the country became politically independent. During the colonial days, the place of English was very high in the education system. The education provided aimed, to a great extent, at creating a group or class of alienated elite from the indigenous population to assist in the task of ruling the colony. Nyerere emphasizes this point when he says:

The education provided by the colonial government in the two countries which now form Tanzania had a different purpose. It was not designed to prepare young people for the service of their own country; instead it was motivated by a desire to train individuals for the service of the colonial state.

English language was, therefore, one of the obvious instruments for the achievement of that goal. The educated people were mostly destined for white collar jobs. Since there were relatively few places of these, and the medium of

communication there was English, pupils were motivated to learn English and to excel in it at whatever cost.

Besides being a medium of instruction, it was necessary to pass the English language examination before one could qualify for a Secondary School Certificate of Education which, in turn, enabled one to be employed or go for further education. Therefore, we can see that English language as such was the master key for one's advancement. Moreover, there was an oral English examination in addition to the written one. This also necessitated practice in spoken English.

In order to achieve its goal, as I have pointed above, the colonial government made sure that schools were provided with enough of all the necessary materials and facilities, eg. text books, class reading books, class library books, drama equipment and facilities like curtained stages with other things, and above all, qualified teachers of the subject. Moreover, English was emphasized right from the primary school level where the higher classes used the language as the medium of instruction too. No pupil could proceed on to a higher class without passing the examination at the end of the year. In this way, secondary schools, in that period, were filled only with pupils who were able both in English language and in other subjects. These continued to excel given the conditions for advancement and facilities provided.

At independence and during the early years of independence, English continued to be placed high in the education system. Just like during the colonial days it continued to be the medium of communication in most of the public offices, and the medium of instruction in schools from primary standard VI. All the factors which helped the colonial education system to motivate pupils to learn the language, and

teachers to emphasize it were continued in this period too. For example the oral English examination. Passing the English examination was still a condition for obtaining the certificate of education and, therefore, being able to get better employment or going for higher education. Debates and drama were still very important in those days. In the lake regions and Tabora region for example, there used to be inter-school drama competitions, popularly known as "Drama Festivals". These died out just after 1968.

There were also many essay writing competitions with attractive prizes, sponsored by private firms. Teaching and reading materials were also made available in sufficient quantities and were appropriate in form though not in content. The problem of teachers was not big because it was the time when peace-corps were brought in big numbers and the secondary schools were comparatively not very many.

The Ministry of Education at that time used to be allocated a relatively high, if not the highest percentage of the whole national budget. I think this also helped in the whole endeavour of teaching English and keeping its standard high. The supply of enough teaching and reading materials, running of inter-school debates and drama competitions etc need money. The amount of money allocated to the Ministry of Education has been going down, comparatively, since then..

In 1965, the Tanzania Parliament passed a bill to make Kiswahili the official language in all government and public institution offices. It became the medium of instruction in primary schools too. At secondary school level it was made a compulsory subject to every pupil. From the early seventies, passing Kiswahili examination together with Siasa, became a condition for a pupil to qualify for a Certificate of Education with division one and two. English

was no longer such a condition. Even the oral examination was done away with. It was re-introduced in 1975 but then it did not last long. Such steps substantiate Nyerere's words that:

our national language has been given the importance in our curriculum which it needs deserves.²

One can be sure that the steps brought a natural death to the prestigious place held by English in the British colonial era. There was no more need for the pupils to struggle to acquire the language outside the 40 or 80 minutes contact with the teacher. Teachers also faced no serious embarrassment, threats and consequences if pupils did not excel or pass the English examinations. So, many no longer cared much. Moreover, the Party and Government made sure that Kiswahili language was really supreme. For example, the BAKITA (BARAZA LA KISWAHILI TANZANIA), meaning The Council for Kiswahili Language in Tanzania, was established to this end. It was also the time when "Ngonjera", poems which are recited by a group of people with some acting, and, cultural troupes which act plays in Kiswahili started.

Through BAKITA, Ngonjera, speeches by political leaders, songs and cultural troupes, people got the message that language is a very important part of one's culture. Without culture you are like a dead person in that you have no identity at all. Language can be used as an instrument of cultural imperialism. As a result, many people, especially the unschooled majority, came to despise English very much. I one day witnessed in an UDA - DMT by then, a person being booed and ridiculed by a group of passengers

after having spoken in English to his friend. This was in the mid-seventies. One had to ensure that the environment is suitable before he could speak English to a fellow Tanzanian freely, otherwise, people would turn round and give them a frown if not abusive words.

In school again, English text-books were changed to those with a Tanzanian environment and content. This was very proper. Only that the books turned out to be very boring both to pupils and teachers. They contained long stories with rather too much of the political element. In fact they were written as if English was the first language of the learners, and not their second or rather third language. The form used by the owners of the language, the British, was also thrown overboard. I experienced this situation as a long time primary school teacher. Besides the books being a bore, they were not enough in most cases. Class library books were hardly there even in secondary schools. Pupils in form III had to start reading long complicated novels without preparation and practice of any kind in the lower forms. The change of syllabus and books from those of the colonial type to Tanzanian ones threw away everything else without an alternative, no matter how good or useful it was.

So, we can imagine the future of English language in education system in such a situation. No wonder the Screening Test and Intensive Grammar Programme at the Universities, and communication skills courses at all higher places of learning had finally to begin.

By the early 1980's the Party and the government realized the mistake it had made by drastically playing down English in the Education system, while the material conditions compel us to go on using the language as a medium of instruction at least at the secondary school and tertiary

levels. This realization was the result of the wide cry over falling standard of education all over the country. Many pupils have been performing more and more poorly in secondary schools and higher institutions of learning due to language problems. As earlier pointed out in the introduction, language facilitates thought and interaction of ideas. Therefore, pupils cannot be expected to do well in their studies using a language which they have not mastered at all.

After this realization, the government has tried to take some steps to save the sinking boat: First of all, the textbooks from primary school level onward have been changed. There are now more of the form like that used by the Oxford books. The content is still Tanzanian, and, to a larger extent African, but the political element has been greatly reduced. Pupils and teachers enjoy using the books better than the previous ones. However, this is a minor step toward the real solution compared to the magnitude of the whole problem. Textbooks alone cannot suffice in learning language skills. Moreover, even the supply and availability of the textbooks has continued to be a problem.

The government must have realized this fact too when it decided to ask the British government to help. The British government then came up with the English support Project for the country. The project basically aims at raising the standard of English in secondary schools. It has been supplying text-books and class readers mostly with African content. It is also supplying graded class library books and reading cards with a wide variety of titles. The themes are fairly universal. However, owing to the number of pupils and the question of day schools and double sessions, the need to let pupils borrow library books so that they can have enough time to read as many books as

possible calls for a greater supply of the books than is the case now.

Besides supplying books and other materials, the project has been conducting regular seminars and workshops to help the teachers of English to teach effectively and comfortably using those materials. Every year some teachers are given a chance to attend a short course in England as well. If the problem of class library books is solved, I am quite hopeful that this project is going to play a big role in the revival of the English standard in this country.

However, I am still doubtful whether it is going to be fully successful unless something is done, on the part of the government, to help the project. I am sure it is going to be handicapped by problems resulting from some of the government policies and decisions. For example, a full utilization of the support project calls for at least eight periods on the time table per week. This means the number of periods per day must be increased, otherwise the number of periods per week in other subjects will have to be reduced. Boarding schools and single session day schools have no problem of allocating eight periods per week but not day secondary schools with double sessions. It is impracticable to have more than eight periods per day in these latter schools. Taking Mwanza Secondary school as an example, the number of periods in other subjects which were reduceable has been reduced and cannot be further reduced. This exercise enables English as a subject to have only six periods per week. Now, are these schools going to be denied the full use of the project?

My suggestion here is that, in such schools, the subjects which are not very important at secondary schools level should be replaced by English periods. These are cookery, sewing, typing and music. Centres for these should be

established in towns to run evening classes and during holidays for interested secondary school pupils to attend. These should then register for the examination as private candidates if they want to. The nutrition lessons taught in Domestic Science could be incorporated in Biology, which is compulsory to every pupil.

Another factor which may contribute to the failure of the project is the non-existence of conditions which help to motivate learners to learn the language, and teachers to emphasize it by all means. Some of these have already been mentioned. They include re-introduction of oral examination, and making a passing in English a condition for being awarded a certificate of education or at least a certificate with pass at the highest two divisions.

However, in order that pupils talented in other subjects are not lost, they should be allowed to re-sit the English examination as private candidates. After passing, the result should be combined with the results of the school candidacy examination and then the pupil should be allowed to go for further studies according to his or her combination. But, of course, this will be fair only if every pupil is provided with all the chances of acquiring the language readily.

Just to recapitulate, English in the Tanzanian Education system started to become less important from 1965 when Kiswahili was made the official language. By the mid 1980's probably due to the Party supremacy, Kiswahili had gained an even higher place in the education system while that of English went further and further down. Ironically, English has had to be retained as a medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels. As a result, by 1980's the proficiency of students became very poor in English and

these problems. So far, the government has taken several steps with the aim of raising the standard of English in secondary schools. It, therefore, deserves congratulations and I hope the support project is here to stay. However, the place of English in the education system must also be raised if the standard of it is to be reasonably high. One could suggest the following measures to raise the place of English: Firstly, the oral English examination should be re-introduced. Secondly, pupils should be required to pass the English examination in order to deserve a first or second division pass and, in some cases, the certificate of education itself. This is when a pupil has passed at division 4 level, and due to failure in English she or he is demoted to 0 division.

Thirdly, a solution should be found by the government to enhance and emphasize the organization of inter-school drama competition. These could even be done at a national level periodically. Debates should also be emphasized. For example, the RTD could have a programme for broadcasting some interesting joint debates from different regional schools. Fourthly, different private and even public firms should be encouraged to sponsor more essay writing competitions. Lastly, a monthly English Magazine for schools could be established whereby the best contributor would be awarded. The Magazine should involve pupils mostly. It should contain non-fiction and fiction articles as well as puzzles, quizzes, comedy, jokes and other things which are interesting and useful to pupils.

There is no harm any more in placing English high in our education system because I believe that now Tanzanians are politically mature enough. They can not easily be alienated by it, thanks to the Siasa subject and the mass media. I am sure even the public as a whole now understands or can be made to understand that English is still a

necessary evil in the search for our social, technical and economic development. There is no way we can achieve this in isolation. We have to cooperate with the world. Due to our historical background, English is the only major means through which we can cooperate with world.

Notes:

- 1 J K Nyerere, Ujamaa Essays on Socialism (Dar es Salaam Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 46
- 2 Nyerere, p. 49.