



Mother Tongue Education in Kenya: Significance, Challenges and Prospects in a Multilingual Situation

John M. Kobia

Department of Languages and Literature Education,
Western University of Science and Technology,

P.O. Box 190,

KAKAMEGA-KENYA 50100.

Mobile Phones: 0733 879243 or 0720 809725

jkobia2001@yahoo.com

Paper presented for consideration for publication in **LWATI: Journal of Contemporary Research**, University of Swaziland, September 2006.

Mother Tongue Education in Kenya: Significance, Challenges and Prospects in A Multilingual Situation

Abstract

The importance of mother tongue(s) (also referred to as vernaculars or indigenous languages or African languages) in the cognitive, linguistic, personal and educational development of children cannot be overemphasized. Indeed it is out of this recognition that the UNESCO declared 2006, the Year of African Languages. In spite of this, the language policy in Kenya before and after independence has been tilted in favour of English and to some extent Kiswahili, at the expense of mother tongue(s).

The big question posed in this paper is: When will the mother tongue(s) in Kenya take their rightful position in the education system? This paper aims at analysing the language policy as far as mother tongue education (MTE) is concerned in Kenya within an historical perspective. Of particular concern is the significance of mother tongue in the school system, the wider community and the nation.

The paper addresses some of the persistent problems and challenges that hinder the teaching of indigenous languages in

Kenya. Suggestions of possible strategies that can be used to revitalize mother tongue education in Kenya are highlighted.

1.0 The Current Language Situation in Kenya

Kenya is a country found in the East African region located approximately between latitudes 4 0 21' and 4 0 28' S of the Equator. It lies between longitudes 34 0 and 42 0 East. According to 1999, Human Population Census, Kenya has a population of 28,686,607 people found in the eight provinces. Historically, Kenya was a colony of Britain until it attained independence in 1963. Kenya is located in East Africa. It is bordered by Tanzania on the South, Ethiopia and Sudan on the North, Uganda on the West, Somalia on the East and Indian Ocean on the South-East. It covers an area of 582, 646.4 km² (Ojany, F & Ogendero, R., 1987:1).

Kenya is a linguistically heterogeneous and a diverse country. The history of language policy in Kenya is well documented (Whiteley 1974, Mbaabu 1996a). According to Ferguson (1966:307) language situation in any country refers to the "total configuration of language use at a given time and place, including data such as how many and what kinds of languages are spoken in the area by how many people, under what circumstances, and what the attitudes and beliefs about language held by the community are". However, in most developing countries, Kenya included, sometimes it is difficult to get the exact figure of languages spoken due to various factors.

Kenya is a multi-ethnic, multilingual and a multidialectal country. It is multilingual by the fact that it has many indigenous and exogenous languages. It is multidialectal in the sense that in most mother tongues there are dialects within it. Examples of exogenous languages include English, Arabic, French, German, Chinese while indigenous languages include Ekegusii, Kalenjin, Boran to mention a few. The ethno-linguistic diversity of Kenya has led to the adoption of trilingual language policy in education. This paper's focus is on indigenous languages in education, although for comparative purposes, English, Kiswahili and other African languages are mentioned.

In Kenya, the official language is English, while Kiswahili is assigned the national language status. It is estimated that Kenya has over 42 indigenous languages, which are exclusively used for intra-ethnic communication in rural areas (Ogechi, 2003:279). The complexity of the exact number of languages spoken in Kenya is complicated due to emergence of Sheng, English and various dialects in each Mother Tongue.

1.1 Language policy on mother tongue education in Kenya

The Ominde Commission (1964) gave wide reaching recommendations, which had far reaching effects as far as language policy is concerned. The commission favoured English as a medium of instruction in primary school at a lower level as even as primary 1. The commission felt there was no need for assigning the vernaculars the role of educational medium “were ill-adapted in the critical early years of schooling”. However, the commission validated (single handedly) that mother tongues can be used for a daily period of story telling from standard one to three. The commission can be attributed to be the genesis of all the problems that has faced learning and teaching of and in mother tongues in our education system since independence.

Earlier on, The Beecher Report of 1949 had advocated for use and teaching of mother tongues in the first 3 years of primary schooling. However, although the recommendation had good intentions for the mother tongue, it was faced with problem of unavailability of teaching materials (Musau, 2003:158). The Beecher Report of 1949 had recommended the use of 20 mother tongues in primary schools. This was a great challenge though, because with over 40 mother tongues, it was problematic to use only 20 mother tongues for instruction.

Kenya attained independence in 1963 from the British colonialists. The Gachathi Report of 1976, just like the Beecher Report of 1949, recommended mother tongues (which the report referred to as languages of the catchment areas) to be used as languages of instruction from class 1 to 3 (Mbaabu, 1996a:147).

A close study of language policy in Kenya after independence reveals that it is the Gachathi Report of 1976, which brought some hope to the teaching of African languages in Kenya’s education system. The

Mother Tongue Education in Kenya.....

committee reinforced that the language of instruction from standard one to three should be the language of the catchment area.

This was a step in the right direction and this is the policy to-date. The language policy in the education system in Kenya is that English is supposed to be the medium of instruction, except in Kiswahili subject in Primary school for Std 1 to Std 8. Mother tongue is assigned the language of instruction for lower primary, class 1 to 3. However, this is in theory because in practice, especially in rural areas, some schools use mother tongue code-switched with Kiswahili and English as a medium of instruction even in class eight.

Kenya has no definite clear and elaborate language policy. What we have regarding language policy is various recommendations by education commissions set up since independence. The importance of a country having a clear language policy cannot be overemphasized. Noting the significance of national language to a country, the President of Malaysia once stressed, "A nation without a language policy is a nation without a soul and a life" (cited in Mutasa, 2003:3). On the question of language policy in Africa, Lodhi (1993:81) states:

As far as language policies are concerned, it is difficult to find a comprehensive document in African countries. Language policies are usually taken for granted, and very often they are defined in decrees, or directives from the ministry of education stating the language, or languages, of instruction at different levels of educational system.

However, few countries like South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt among others have clear language policy spelt out in the country's constitution. For instance, the South African constitution recognizes indigenous languages and compels the state to 'take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages'.

The current Kenya's constitution is silent on mother tongue in education or in other cultural activities. It makes no attempt at preservation, advancement or their development especially at primary school. However, the Proposed Constitution of Kenya (2005) Bill, which was rejected by the Kenyans during November 2005 referendum, had a more elaborate and clear language policy. Under the rejected constitution, each language was clearly defined in terms of its functions and the state had an obligation to promote and develop the languages. In particular, the Draft Constitution (2005) proposed that:

1. The official languages of Kenya are Kiswahili and English and all official documents shall be made available in both languages.
2. The national language of Kenya is Kiswahili.
3. The state shall respect and protect the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya and shall promote the development and use of Kiswahili, indigenous languages sign languages and Braille.

Proponents of development have advocated the use of African languages in development. The implementation of the Mackay (1984) Report has been problematic. For instance, although the Report recommended the teaching of Kiswahili to all undergraduate students at the Second (Moi) University, to-date this remain a wishful thinking.

Kiswahili is the language of cross-ethnic communication in Kenya (Musau, 2003:157). Kenya, like most African countries is multilingual and multicultural. It has over 42 indigenous languages spoken in various parts of the country. However, this multilingualism is not captured in the country's constitution. Lack of elaborate language policy within a constitutional framework is a major drawback towards the promotion of mother tongue in Kenya.

2.0 Mother tongue and mother tongue education: A Definition

Mother tongue is defined by UNESCO (1953:46) as "the language which a person acquires in early years and which normally becomes their natural instrument of thought and communication". In Kenya, the Kenya Institute of Education (2002:117) defines mother tongue as "the first language a child is expected to or the language of the schools' catchment area".

Any attempt to define what constitutes mother tongue education has elicited controversy in academic circles. This paper will not focus on this debate but will adapt the one proposed by UNESCO as a working definition. According to UNESCO (1968:698) mother tongue education is:

Education which uses its medium of instruction a person's mother tongue, that is, the language a person has acquired in early years and which normally has become his/her natural instrument of thought and communication.

In Kenya, for instance, a child experiences mother tongue education for the first three years of primary school education, from Standard one to three.

2.1 Arguments in favour of Mother Tongue Education

A survey of available literature on mother tongue education reveals that a battle-line is drawn between institutions and scholars who support and oppose it.

In the frontline in support of mother tongue education is UNESCO. UNESCO maintains that literacy acquisition and second language proficiency depend on well-developed first language proficiency (UNESCO, 1968), which is the mother tongue. The UNESCO report of 1953 clearly articulated the significance of using mother tongue as language of instruction in early schooling. UNESCO (1953:11) observes:

It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his [her] mother tongue. **Psychologically** it is the system of meaningful signs that in his [her] mind works automatically for the expression and understanding. **Sociologically**, it is a means of

identification among members of the community to which he [she] learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium (Emphasise and gender sensitive terms mine).

However, UNESCO (1968:689-690) cautions that a mother tongue need not necessarily be the language which a child's parents use nor need it be the first language a child speaks. Mother tongue is the language, which a person acquires in early years and which becomes his or her natural instrument of thought and communication (UNESCO, 1953).

Arguments in favour of mother education point that children do better if they get basic education in their mother tongue. UNESCO (2005:1) cites a study in New Zealand, which revealed that Maori children who received basic education in their own language performed better than those educated in English only. When pupils learn in their mother tongue they feel that their language is recognized, respected and valued. In recognition of mother tongue, UNESCO, proclaimed in 1999, International Mother Language Day which is celebrated on 21st February every year. Because language is related to culture and people's identity therefore it can be argued that denying pupils to learn in their mother tongue at basic level of education is tantamount to "erasing" their identity.

Various international and regional institutions support mother tongue education. For instance, OAU (now African Union) recognizes the use of African languages as medium of instruction in primary school level. Among the aims and objectives of OAU Language Plan of Action for Africa of 1986 is "to encourage the increased use of African languages as vehicles of instructions at all educational levels".

Other declarations which have been made in support of mother tongue education include Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literature of 2000 which states, *Inter alia*: "All African children have the... right to attend school and learn in their mother tongues". The Asmara Declaration recognizes the use of mother tongue in education as one of the linguistic rights of African children. It is a linguistic human right for a child to identify with his/her mother

Mother Tongue Education in Kenya.....

tongue, learn it and have education through it and use it (Phillipson *et al*, 1995:7). In Kenya, mother tongue has been relegated to third class status. This is partly due to the negative attitude of the populace towards African languages.

Mother tongue education in Kenya face numerous bottlenecks ranging from lack of published course books and dictionaries, untrained teachers in teaching of mother tongue to negative attitudes toward mother tongue. However, the problems are not only cited in Kenya but also in other African countries. Chiwome and Thondhlana (1992) cites the same problems facing Shona in South Africa. Every individual has a right to use a language of his/her choice in day-to-day activities including in education. Mutasa (2003:37) views mother tongue instruction as an inalienable right.

Yet another argument put forward in favour of mother tongue education is that mother tongue is the language through which the child is inducted into the world hence it is through it that the child will gain an understanding of his/her environment (Mutasa, 2003:24). Mutasa's (2003) argument echoes earlier sentiments advanced by Bamgbose (1979) and Adebija (1994) who support mother tongue education due to its capability to enhance child's educational performance in other subjects and psychological support.

According to Mutasa (2003:241), mother tongue accelerates learning and injects pride and independence. In the same vein, Mbaabu (1996) observes that learning a foreign language is tantamount to learning a new culture and hence cultural dependency.

Educationists support the view that learners best learn from simple to complex, known to unknown. The known language that a child encounters in his/her life is mother tongue. Malmberg (1964) cited in Kennedy (1984:180) proclaims succinctly:

Elementary schooling in a language other than the child's mother tongue represents a serious departure from the fundamental educational rule that one should move from

known to unknown. Only the mother tongue with its links to the child's environment and experiences can introduce the child to the world of abstract experiences and high culture.

The role of mother tongue in child's growth and development cannot be overemphasized. It is a linguistic injustice to deny a child an opportunity to learn his/her mother tongue at lower levels of schooling. It is against this background that the Ministry of Education through the Kenya Institute of Education developed the new mother tongue syllabus for standard one to three.

Scholars in mother tongue education allude to the fact that, a child is able to learn various concepts, ideas and skills more effectively through the use of mother tongue. It is easier for a learner to conceptualize and internalize concepts using mother tongue than say national or official language. A leading scholar in mother tongue education, Prof. Adedeji Awoniyi, observes that children begin to learn basic values of their society through their language. The UNESCO's position as far as mother tongue education is concerned remains:

On educational grounds, we recommend that the use of mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue, because they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and the school as small as possible (UNESCO, 1953:47-48) cited in Ogechi, 2003:284).

UNESCO advocates the use of Mother tongue on psychological, sociological and educational grounds. Mother tongue education is

Mother Tongue Education in Kenya.....

supported by educationists due to its applicability to cognitive development of a child. Learners have difficulties in developing cognitive skills when taught through the medium of a second language especially if it is not related to the learners' mother tongue (McNab 1989:15). UNESCO advances the point of view that pupil's mother tongue is the best for expressional and understanding of concepts. This is compared to exogenous languages like English, which the pupil has to learn the subject before being instructed in the language.

Various studies have indicated that pupils' school performance is better when they are taught in the language used within the local community otherwise referred to as mother tongue. Pupils' thoughts, imaginations and creativity are nurtured and activated through their mother tongue. The Kenya Institute of Education, the institution charged with the role of curriculum, lists the following reasons for inclusion of mother tongue in the primary school curriculum:

- The culture of a people is expressed in mother tongue. Mother Tongue must be taught positively so that learners can respect their cultural heritage as a basis for appreciating that of other people and make own contribution when they grow up.
- Mother Tongue when used as a medium of instruction provides children with a sense of belonging, self-confidence and motivates them to participate in all school activities. This provides for a smooth transition experience (KIE, 2002:117).

Because language is closely related to culture, it is not in order for an African child to learn only foreign languages like English, French or German. Although we are in the era of globalisation, the concept of globalization entails exchanging ideas, concepts language and culture and not to be economically, cultural and linguistically depend, so to speak. In the Kenyan context, learning and teaching of mother tongue has been faced with a myriad of problems before and after independence.

2.2 Arguments Against Mother Tongue Education

Those who argue against mother tongue education point out the financial implications of implementing the programme. This is for instance, due to the diversity of Kenyan mother tongues. It is estimated that Kenya has over 42 vernaculars (Ogechi, 2003). More complexity arises due to the fact that most Kenyan indigenous languages has various dialects some as many as 18 like the Luhya language. It becomes very expensive to provide each child with education in her/his vernaculars.

One of the arguments advanced by critics of MTE is that using vernacular languages impedes national unity. It has been argued that a national language is good for national unity discourages tribalism. Some scholars have argued that mother tongue education can cause division and disunity in a country. Gupta (1997) for instance believes that promoting mother tongue education may result in extensive separation of ethnic groups in the education system. However, this position taken by Gupta (1997) has its own shortcomings because it has been proved that language is not the major cause of political instability and disunity. However, national disunity may be found in country, which may even have one language. For example, Somalia national disunity is not related to the question of mother tongue but associated with political, clan and ideological differences.

Mother tongue education has also been accused to be the cause of failure of learners to learn effectively a second language. For instance in Kenya, poor performance in English and Kiswahili compositions, especially at KCPE, has been blamed on mother tongue interference. To address this, opponents of MTE argue that to learn a second language well, it is important that it be used as a medium of instruction right from the start (Fasold, 1984:294). However, scientific research by UNESCO, which is supported by various scholars, suggests otherwise, in that the better way to introduce a second language is to teach it first as a subject, using mother tongue as a medium (UNESCO, 1968:692).

3.0 Factors that Hamper Mother Tongue Education in Kenya

3.1 Unavailability of Teaching Materials

Learning and teaching materials remain one of the major challenges in mother tongue education. As was noted earlier in this paper,

Kenya has over 42 indigenous languages with numerous dialects. Since independence, Kenya Literature Bureau, a state-owned publisher has been able to develop instructional materials for only 22 languages (Mbaabu, 1996). With revised syllabus of 2002, things are no better. Infact they are worse as it stands today. Out of the 42 languages it is in only one language (Kikamba) that a Std one course book has been developed, vetted and approved by Kenya Institute of Education. This is in spite of the liberalisation of the publishing industry. Kenya boasts of over 20 registered publishers. However, they have shied away from publishing in mother tongue citing low returns because publishers worldwide are driven by profit and returns.

Very few publishers are willing to venture in publishing in African languages. Their major argument is lack of wide market compared to for instance, English and Kiswahili. The fact that English and Kiswahili are compulsory and examinable subjects provides a ready market for the published materials in the languages.

Unavailability of learning and teaching materials leads teachers to use their own discretion on what to do with time allocated for mother tongue in lower primary. In most cases they teach English or Mathematics or just storytelling. Unavailability of learning and teaching materials hampers greatly the promotion and development of mother tongue education. In the past, in some areas, children used to learn using materials developed for other mother tongues. For example, the children in Chuka area continue to be instructed in Kikuyu instead of their mother tongue, Kimeru.

3.2 Lack of Research in Mother Tongue

Research in any language is one of the ways of promoting the language. However, very few studies have been done on mother tongue education especially at our universities. As Mutasa (2003:325) suggests, "The use of African languages needs to be supported by research in the development of terminology and standardisation". This is because mother tongue has been blamed due to lack of appropriate terminology to address the fast growing world especially in science and technology. The presence of diverse dialects in African languages is a major reason to call for their standardisation.

KIE has developed an elaborate curriculum for the teaching of mother tongue from standard 1 to standard 3. It is not enough for leaders and scholars to glorify African languages without devoting their time and energy in developing the languages. In fact it is hypocritical for arguments to be advanced in favour of mother tongue education when there are no teaching and learning materials in the language and teachers are not trained in the methodology of teaching the language at teachers' training colleges.

3.3 Negative Attitude Towards Mother Tongues

Negative attitude towards mother tongue especially by urban parents is a major hindrance to the success of mother tongue in education. Parents pose a serious threat to mother tongue education. In Kenya, most parents prefer their children to be taught in English and not mother tongue even at lower primary. Parents' attitudes towards mother tongue education in Africa is best captured by Bamgbose (2000:88) thus:

Even the idea that a child will benefit if his or her initial education is given in the first language is disputed by many so-called educated parents...parents who prefer an English-medium education sometimes do so because they see the products of an English-medium getting rewards in terms of lucrative jobs and upward social mobility.

The major argument advanced here is that English is the language of connecting one to the world, the language of wider communication and the language of a globalised world (Webb and Kembo-Sure, 2000). The international status that English language enjoys makes parents feel that it is the language of the future for their children. As Corson (1993:71-72) notes "...when a language spoken by a minority is not used in schooling either as a means of instruction or as a curriculum subject, then it is clear to all concerned that that language is not valued in the school." Nkosi (1965:109) captures vividly the negative attitudes of Africans towards their mother tongues thus:

As long as Africans feel intensively inferior as human beings and valorise other nations as superior to them, they would in turn, not have regard for their indigenous languages.

This should be eradicated at all cost. One way of eliminating the stereotypes towards African languages is by making them compulsory especially at places where a certain linguistic group predominantly occupies the catchment area.

At the school level, pupils should not be punished for speaking their mother tongue especially during socialisation like during break time or during games. Pupils should be encouraged to speak their mother tongues alongside English and Kiswahili. By punishing children who speak their mother tongue, it is just like killing their heritage, culture and to a large extent their creativity. It is worrying that pupils were [are] punished for speaking their mother tongue in the school. This sets a bad example that their language is inferior compared to other languages like English. When a teacher punishes a pupil for speaking his/her mother tongue, a strong message is communicated that he/she should “renounce any allegiance to their language and culture” (Cummins, 2000).

A child has a linguistic right to receive education through his/her mother tongue during the early years of schooling (Asmara Declaration, 2000). This is best captured by a remark by Robinson (2005:2) that “children who learn in another language get two messages — that if they want to succeed intellectually, it won’t be by using their mother tongue and also that their mother tongue is useless”.

3.4 Presence of exotic (European) languages

The place of mother tongue education in the school system in Africa generally is wanting. The European languages like English, Portuguese; French have been given a special preference at the expense of indigenous African languages. For example, Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000:6) enumerates the following reasons why English is preferred as a medium of instruction in school:

English is a world language, it provides access to almost all the sources of knowledge (school textbooks) and entertainment (literature, television, films), it is the most important language of work in the country, it allows one to communicate with billions of people all over the world, it is the language of most successful people in the western world, and it is the language of the struggle against apartheid.

Over-dependence on foreign colonial languages like English and French and at the same time, negative attitudes of Africans towards their mother tongues may lead to a situation one may call 'linguistic imperialism'.

Scholars like Prah (1995) cited in Kamwangamalu (2000:123) have lamented that although most African states constitutionally create space for African languages, they hardly attempt to alter what was handed down through the colonial experience. Whereas most African countries like South Africa have recognised African indigenous languages in their constitution, Kenya is yet to incorporate them into her constitution.

3.4 Lack of Economic resources

Scholars like Maluleke (2005) and Lanham (1978) cite lack of economic resources as one of the challenges facing mother tongue. To promote and develop mother tongues, economic and manpower resources are needed. Efforts towards developing African languages should not be left alone to a few scholars but the government should support such efforts financially. The government should provide financial support and incentives to organisations charged with the responsibility of developing indigenous languages. For instance, the government should allocate more funds to the K.I.E. or publishers to commission authors and publish mother tongue course books for use in lower primary. Also, more funds should be set-aside for training and re-training primary school teachers on current methodology of teaching mother tongues.

The onus is on the government to preserve, promote and develop mother tongue. If urgent measures are not taken, it is no wonder may be, twenty years from now, we might encounter a looming disaster, linguistic genocide of various African languages.

3.5 Presence of numerous dialects of one mother tongue

One of the main impediments towards viable mother tongue education programmes in Kenya is the daunting task of determining which dialect to pick from, in an African language, which has many dialects. For instance, Luhya language has over 18 dialects Kimeru language over 9 dialects and Kalenjin over 10 dialects.

There are always problems of which dialect the course books will for instance be written in. The pupils whose dialect is not captured in course books may feel that their dialect is inferior. Also, it may not be easy to accept the dialect, if it is not theirs. Moreover, sometimes a teacher may be using a different dialect from the one used by pupils within the same mother tongue. Ogechi (2003:284) citing Chakava (1995:386) notes "It is doubtful if there exist teachers who can teach, leave alone speak, the vernaculars well enough" and also "Publishers have been unable to publish in all 42 Kenyan languages".

Many publishers are shy or reluctant to publish in mother tongue partly because of limited market and lack of qualified personnel like editors to deal with diverse mother tongues in Kenya. An editor dealing with mother tongue for instance besides being a native speaker, he/she should be qualified and experienced teacher and linguist.

3.6 Lack of Political will

Mutasa (2003:232) opines that, "... political will is an integral component in policy implementation in the sense that government leadership gives momentum to the actual implementation of the language policy". The government of Kenya seems that it does not support the teaching of indigenous languages in the country. This is due to the fact that there is no clear policy of training teachers on mother tongue education. In addition to this, lack of a well established language council as far as legislation is concerned points to the fact that there is lack of political will. The Bill for

establishment of the council has been lying at the National Assembly for years.

The problem of language policy in most African countries, Kenya included, is lack of implementation. However good a language policy is, without mechanisms, resources and political will to implement, it is all in vain. Bamgbose (1991:111) sums up the state of language policies in Africa that they are "... declarations without implementation". For instance, the Ominde Commission of 1964, recommended the teaching of indigenous languages but over 40 years since then, mother tongue education is in a state of apathy.

4.0 Recommendations, Proposals and Way Forward

For mother tongue to thrive, they must be developed and promoted in the education system. As Bamgbose (2003:67) reiterates "...unless a language is developed, it cannot be used in education and, unless it is used in education it cannot be developed." In other words, the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in education system is a step in the right direction towards their development for wider use.

Towards promoting mother tongue education, political will is crucial. There is need to appreciate and recognize mother tongues in Kenya's constitution. This calls for political will of the ruling elite because the whole issue of language policy is a political issue. UNESCO (2003:2) quotes Linda King, a senior programme specialist with UNESCO's Divisions for Promotion of Quality Education saying:

Every decision about languages is political. But the technical issues of how to teach them are involved too. The main thing is to respect local languages and legitimize them within the school system as well as giving pupils access to a national and foreign language.

In the Kenyan situation, there is need to develop mother tongue alongside Kiswahili as national language and English together with other foreign languages. As things stand today, more emphasis is on English and to some extent Kiswahili, while mother tongue has been

Mother Tongue Education in Kenya.....

neglected or little attention paid to it. This trend needs to be reversed.

UNESCO Report (2002) claims that almost 16 Kenyan languages are threatened with extinction or death. One way of saving the endangered languages is by teaching the languages as subjects in the education system and using them as medium of instruction in the catchment areas. However, instructional materials must first be published in the languages and the training of teachers of mother tongues.

The challenge for future country's constitution is to address mother tongue education and set out mechanisms aimed at their preservation and promotion in the country. Efforts aimed at promoting and development of mother tongue education should be enshrined in the Kenyan constitution. Other African countries like South Africa and Siera Leone have led the way and are good examples to emulate. Specifically, South African's constitution (Act 108 of 1996) states elaborately that:

Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages (Section 6 (2)).

As a matter of fact, the choice of medium of instruction, in the education system, as an aspect of language planning is a political matter (Rahman, 1997). By incorporating the multilingual language policy in the constitution, the future of mother tongue education will be secured. This calls for educationists, linguists and all stakeholders in Kenya to prevail on the political elite to argue for a case in favour of the mother tongue education at the lower Primary School and implementation of the multilingual language policy.

Africans cannot afford to loose their indigenous languages because as Mithun in Crystal (2003:38 laments "...the loss of languages [mother tongue included] is tragic precisely because they are not

interchangeable, precisely because they represent the distillation of the thoughts and communication of a people over their entire history". Concerted efforts are needed from all stakeholders. Deliberate efforts to promote mother tongue education should be the core business of linguists, educationalists, politicians, publishers, parents, all and sundry towards promotion of indigenous languages in Kenya.

The multilingualism situation that is exhibited in Kenya should be strength but not a weakness. Multilingual situation should continue to unite the various linguistic groups. African countries should harness the diversity of the African languages. Teaching and learning of mother tongue in education is one way of safeguarding African language from the danger of language death.

3.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to unravel the challenges facing mother tongue education in Kenya, a country which is multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual and multidialectal. It can be deduced from the discussions presented reveal that adequate efforts have not been made to address the issue of mother tongue education in Kenya at policy implementation.

This paper agrees with Phaswana's (1994:36) observation that, "As long as English is still perceived as the language of power, the economy and education, it will be preferred as the medium of instruction." In this era of globalisation, we are not arguing for elimination of English as a medium of instruction in Kenyan primary education. As Phillipson (1996:162) rightly observes, promoting mother tongue education does not mean "saying farewell to European languages but reducing them to equality". We need to promote mother tongue education alongside English and other foreign languages and Kiswahili. Although it is practically impossible to offer basic education to every child in Kenya in her [his] mother tongue at lower primary, efforts should be made towards bringing the existing gap. The gist of this paper is that we need to develop and promote mother tongue alongside English and Kiswahili at the lower primary level of education. A multilingual person has numerous advantages. As Champion in Crystal (2000:44) observes "a man [or woman] who knows two languages is worth of two men [women]".

In this paper, I argue for support of a linguistic egalitarianism as far as mother tongue education in particular and language policy in general in Kenya is concerned. According to Adebija (1994:4) linguistic egalitarianism involves:

All languages in a multilingual context whether major or minor, exoglossic or endoglossic should be seen as resources that need to be effectively harvested for the total national good and that language policies need to **respect, support and encourage mutual harmonious coexistence of all languages**, no matter their origins and the political or economic power or numerical strength of their speakers [emphasise mine].

References

- Adebija, E. (1994). *Language Attitudes in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Sociolinguistic Overview*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Appel, F & Muysken, P. (1987). *Language Contact and Bilingualism*. London: Edward Arnold Ltd.
- Asmara Declaration, (2000). *Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures*. Available online at <http://www.queensu.ca/snid/samara.htm>. accessed 25/01/06.
- Bamgbose, A. (Ed) (1976). *Mother Tongue Education: The West African Experience*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the Nation: The Language Question in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

John M. Kobia

- Bamgbose, A. (2000). ***Language and Exclusion: The Consequence of Language Policies in Africa***. Munster-Hamburg: Lit Verlag.
- Bamgbose, A. (2003). Language Policy and Promotion of African Languages. In *The Future of Multilingualism in South Africa, From Policy to Practice*. Kopanong: Johannesburg.
- Beecher, L.J. (1949). *African Education in Kenya*. Nairobi: Government Printer.
- Chiwome, E. & Thondhlana, J. (1992). Sociolinguistics and Education: A Survey Concerning Attitudes on the Teaching of Shona through the Media of Shona and English. In R.K. Herbert (ed). *Language and Society in Africa: Theory and Practice of Sociolinguistics*. Witwatersrand: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Constitution of Kenya Review Commission. (2005). ***Proposed Draft Constitution of Kenya***. Nairobi: Government Printer.
- Constitutional Assembly (1996). *The Constitution of South Africa*. Cape Town: Typeface Media.
- Corson, D. (1993). ***Language, Minority Education and Gender***. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Crystal, D. (2000). *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Fasold, R. (1984). ***The Sociolinguistics of Society***. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Ferguson, C.A. (1959). Diglossia. In *Word*, 15:325-40. Reprinted in Giglioli (1972), Hymes (1964).

Mother Tongue Education in Kenya.....

- Ferguson, C.A. (1968). Language Development. In J.A. Fishman, C.A. Ferguson & J.D. Gupta (eds). *Language Problems of Developing Nations*. New York: John Wiley
- Gupta, A. (1997). When Mother Tongue Education is not Preferred. In: **Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development**. Vol. 18., pp 496-506.
- Hudson, R. A. (1980). *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kennedy, C. (1983). *Language Planning and Language Education*. London: George Allen & Unwin Publishers Ltd.
- Kenya Institute of Education (2002). *Primary Education Syllabus*. Nairobi: Kenya Institute of Education.
- Kamwangamalu, N. M. (2000). Language Policy and Mother Tongue Education: The Case of a Market-oriented Approach. Paper presented at the Georgetown University Roundtable on Languages and Linguistics. Georgetown University, Washington D.C., 4-6, May.
- _____ (2001). The Language Planning Situation in South Africa. In: **Current Issues in Language Planning**. Vol. 2, No. 4: 361-445.
- Lanham, L.W. & Prinsloo, K.P. (eds) (1978). *Language and Communication Studies in South Africa: Final Report of the Language Plan Task Group*. Pretoria: DACST.
- Lodhi A. Y. (1993). The Language Situation in Africa Today. **Nordic Journal of African Studies**. Vol. 2 (1): 79-86.
- MacNab, C. (1989). *Language Policy and Language Practice: Implementation Dilemmas in Ethiopian Education*. Institute of International Education: University of Stockholm.

John M. Kobia

- Malukele, M.J. (2005). "Language As Instrument of Power". M.A. Dissertation. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Mbaabu, I. (1996a). ***Language Policy in East Africa***. Nairobi:
- _____ (1996b). ***Mother-Tongue in Education***. Nairobi: Lectern.
- Ministry of Education. (2006). ***Approved List of Primary School Textbooks and Other Instructional Materials***. Nairobi: Ministry of Education.
- Mukuria, D. (1995). Kenya's Language Policy Developments: Kiswahili. In: Kwadzo Senanu & Drid Williams (Eds), ***Creative Use of Language in Kenya***. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation.
- Musau, P. M. (2003). Linguistic Human Rights in Africa: Challenges and Prospects for Indigenous Languages in Kenya. In ***Language, Culture and Curriculum***. Vol. 16, No. 2. (pp 155-164).
- Mutasa, D.E.(2003). "The Language Policy of South Africa. What do People Say?" Doctoral Thesis. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Nkosi, L. (1965). *Home and Exile and Other Selections*. London: Longman.
- Ogechi, N. O. (2003). On Language Rights in Kenya. ***Nordic Journal of African Studies***. Vol. 12(2): 277-295.
- Ojany, F & Ogendo, R., (1987). *Kenya: A Study in Human and Physical Geography*. Nairobi: Longman.
- Oyetude, O. S. (2003). Language Planning in a Multi-Ethnic State: The Majority/Minority Dichotomy in Nigeria. ***Nordic Journal of African Studies***. Vol. 2 (1): 105-117.
- Phaswana, N.E.(1994). "African Language Planning Policies at the University of Venda". Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, University of Cape Town.

Mother Tongue Education in Kenya.....

Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Phillipson, R., Rannut, M, & Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (eds)(1994). *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Prah, K. (1995). *African Languages for Mass Education for Africans*. Bonn: Education, Science and Documentation Center.

Republic of Kenya. (1964). Kenya Education Commission Report. (Ominde Report). Nairobi: Government Printer.

_____ (1976). Report on the National Committee on Education Objectives and Policies (Gachathi: Report). Nairobi: Government Printer.

_____ (1981). Second University: Report of the Presidential Working Party (Mackay Report). Nairobi: Government Printer.

_____ (1999) Totally Integrated Quality Education and Training (TIQET). Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Educational System of Kenya. Nairobi: Government Printer.

Trudgill, P. (1974). *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction*. Harmondsmorth: Penguin Books.

UNESCO. (1953). *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

Vareness, F. (2001) Language Rights as An Integral Part of Human Rights. MOST Journal on Multicultural Societies. Vol. 3,1

<http://www.unesco.org/most/vl3nlvar.htm>.

Webb, V. & Kembo-Sure, K. (eds) (2000). *African Voices: An Introduction to the Languages and Linguistics of Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

John M. Kobia

Whiteley, W.H. (Ed) (1974). *Language in Kenya*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.