

The Challenge of Mother Tongue Education in Kenya

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Abstract

The importance of mother tongue in the cognitive, linguistic, personal and educational development of children cannot be overemphasised. 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 continues to be tilted in favour of English and to some extent Kiswahili, at the expense of mother tongues.

The question posed in this paper is: When will the mother tongues in Kenya take their rightful position in the education system? This paper aims at analysing the language policy in Kenya. 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. It also suggests possible strategies that can be used to revitalize mother tongue education in the Kenya and elsewhere.

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 adopt 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.”

The Current Language Situation in Kenya

Kenya is a linguistically heterogeneous and diverse country. It has many indigenous and exogenous languages. The exogenous languages include English, Arabic, French, German and Chinese. Hindi while indigenous languages include Ekegusii, Kalenjin, Boran, Dholuo, Gikuyu, to mention a few, while Kiswahili is the language of intertribal communication.

The ethno-linguistic diversity of Kenya has led to the adoption of trilingual language policy in education. 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 homes and 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.

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, it is sometimes difficult to get the exact figure of languages spoken due to various factors.

Language Policy on Education in Kenya

Kenya has no clear and elaborate language policy. What we have are various recommendations by education commissions set up since independence. The first recommendation was made in the Beecher Report of 1949. The report advocated for use and teaching of 20 mother tongues in the first three years of primary schooling. This was a great challenge though, because with over 40 mother tongues, it was problematic to use only 20 for instruction. Secondly, the country was faced with problem of unavailability of teaching materials (Musau, 2003:158).

Kenya attained independence in 1963 and the new government appointed a commission to look into different aspects of education. The Ominde Commission (1964) recommended English as a medium of instruction from primary one. The commission felt that there was no need for assigning the vernaculars the role of educational medium because they “were ill-adapted in the critical early years of schooling”. However, it recommended that mother tongues can be used for a daily period of story telling from standard one to three. The Commission can thus be blamed for all the problems that have faced the learning and teaching in mother tongues in our education system since independence.

Another education commission chaired by Gachathi was appointed in 1976. The Gachathi Report, just like the Beecher Report, recommended mother tongues (which the report referred to as languages of the catchment areas) to be used as languages of instruction from class one to three (Mbaabu, 1996a: 147). This Report brought some hope to the teaching of African languages in Kenya’s education system. The committee reinforced that the language of instruction from standard one to three should be the language of the catchment area 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 Standard one to eight. Mother tongue is assigned the language of instruction for lower primary, class one to three. However, this is in theory because in practice, especially in rural areas, some schools use mother tongue with a mixture of Kiswahili and English as a medium of instruction even in class eight.

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 remains wishful thinking.

The importance of a country having a clear language policy cannot be overemphasised. Noting the significance of national language policy 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, some countries like South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt have clear language policy spelt out in their constitutions. 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 Kenya constitution is silent on mother tongue in education or in other cultural activities. It makes no attempt at preservation, advancement or their development. 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.

Kenya, like most African countries is multilingual and multicultural. 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.

Arguments in Favour of Mother Tongue Education

A survey of available literature reveals that there are different opinions between institutions and scholars about mother tongue education. 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).

It maintains that literacy acquisition and second language proficiency depend on well-developed first language proficiency (UNESCO, 1968), which is the mother tongue. 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). In recognition of mother tongue, it proclaimed an International Mother Language Day in 1999, celebrated on 21 February every year.

Those 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. 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.

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 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 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 the 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 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.

Deliberate efforts to promote mother tongue education should be the core business of linguists, educationalists, politicians, publishers, parents, all and sundry. Indeed, an affirmative action should be adopted towards promotion of indigenous languages in Kenya and elsewhere in the world.

Mutasa (2003:37) views mother tongue instruction as an inalienable right. He argues it 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). This argument echoes sentiments advanced by scholars like Bamgbose (1979) and Adegbija (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, therefore, be overemphasised. 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.

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 pupils' ideas and thoughts are in their mother tongue and will continue to be so, long after they have learnt to speak in English. To be encouraged to think for themselves, the pupils must be helped to do so in their own language. 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 acts as a link between home, Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres and Primary School, and encourages the child's free expression. It is also a tool for the teaching of literacy, numeracy and manipulative skills and a foundation for learning other languages. 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).

Arguments against Mother Tongue Education

Those who argue against mother tongue education point out the financial implications of implementing the programme. In Kenya, for instance, the diversity of mother tongues and dialects makes it very expensive to provide each child with education in her/his vernaculars. Other 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 but the politics of the day. For example, Somalia has one language and the 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 to effectively learn 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).

Factors that Hamper Mother Tongue Education in Kenya

Mother tongue education in Kenya faces 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. Challenges that impede mother tongue education in Kenya include:

a) Unavailability of teaching materials

Learning and teaching materials remain one of the major challenges in mother tongue education. Since independence, Kenya Literature Bureau, a state-owned publisher has been able to develop instructional materials for only 22 languages (Mbaabu, 1996). With the revised syllabus of 2002, things are even worse than before. Out of the 42 languages it is in 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. 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, competent and experienced teacher and linguist.

Publishing in either English or Kiswahili is viewed as both profitable and easy. It is profitable because they two languages are compulsory and examinable subjects and provide a ready market for the published materials at primary and secondary levels. More so, it is easy because there are many professionals trained in these 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 greatly hampers 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.

b) Lack of research in mother tongue

Research is one of the ways of promoting a 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 tongues lack 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.

Kenya Institute of Education 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.

Mother tongues suffer from lack of sufficient vocabulary to address the ever-changing world especially in science and information communication technology (ICT). For instance, most African languages do not have terminologies to refer to email, computer, among others. However, just like any languages, African languages have tended to borrow and indigenise the terminologies through vocabulary expansion. For example in Kenya:

English	Kimeru	Kikamba
Car	<i>ngaari</i>	<i>ngali</i>
Computer	<i>komputa</i>	<i>kombyuta</i>
Television	<i>televisoni</i>	<i>Televesenii</i>
Pistol	<i>basitola</i>	<i>vasitola</i>
Compass	<i>kompasi</i>	<i>kambasi</i>
Doctor	<i>ndagitari</i>	<i>ndakitali</i>

Another problem hampering mother tongue education in Kenya is lack of standardization of African languages and their dialects. Also, related to this is the issue of slow or in some case non-existent of deliberate efforts to address orthographies of various mother tongues. Generally, research in mother tongues in our educational institutions is wanting. Take for example; research on languages in universities has tended to be conducted more in English while mother tongues are at the periphery. There is a need for re-examination of the learning and teaching of mother tongues in our education system.

It can be observed that most African languages, especially the Bantu group have seven vowels. Most of the earlier published materials in indigenous languages have not addressed adequately the issue of orthography. For instance, in the Kikamba language (Kitui North dialect), the word *kithyomo* (language) has, for many years, been written without the ~ accent leaving it as just *kithyomo*. All published materials should address this orthographical issue so as to avoid a misinterpretation of African languages. Also included in the orthography is ã accent common in various Bantu languages.

There should be continuous orthographical standardisation of various dialects of numerous African languages. Standardization in this sense is the use of a supradialectal norm, which “brings to a language the kind of integration and uniformity needed for large scale communication” (Ferguson, 1968). Just as Kiswahili was standardized in East Africa, various African dialects need to be standardised, if efforts aimed at promoting mother tongue education are to succeed.

c) Negative attitude towards mother tongues

Negative attitude towards mother tongue especially by urban parents is a major hindrance. 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 a wider communication and the world (Webb and Kembo-Sure, 2000). The international status that English 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 is a violation of a child's linguistic rights. 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".

d) Presence of exotic (European) languages

European languages like English, Portuguese, and French have been given special preferences 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.

Overdependence 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’.

It is worrying that in some schools in Kenya pupils were [are] punished for speaking their mother tongue. 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).

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.

e) 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 to develop African languages should not be left to a few scholars. Governments should provide financial support and incentives to organisations charged with the responsibility of developing indigenous languages. For instance, the government of Kenya should allocate more funds to the KIE 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.

f) Presence of numerous dialects of one mother tongue

One of the main impediments towards viable mother tongue education programme in Kenya is the daunting task of determining which dialect to teach. For instance, Luhya has over 18, Kimeru 9 and Kalenjin more than 10 dialects.

There are always problems of which dialect the course books should 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”.

g) 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". For example, the government of Kenya does not seem to support the teaching of indigenous languages in the country. This is because there is no clear policy of training teachers on mother tongue education. In addition, there is no language council. The Bill for the establishment of the council has been lying at the National Assembly for years.

Lack of a political will in most African countries is evidenced by the lack of the implementation of language policies. Bamgbose (1991:111), sums up the state of language policies in Africa as, "... declarations without implementation." In Kenya, for instance, the Ominde Commission of 1964, recommended the teaching of indigenous languages, but mother tongue education is still in a state of apathy.

h) Inter-ethnic marriages and mother tongue question

We are living in a world, where race, tribal and ethnic cohesiveness are no longer a prestige or valuable. Instead, we have encountered inter-ethnic and inter-racial marriages. These types of marriages pose a serious threat to mother tongues especially in Africa. However, this may be a blessing to the children born out of such marriages. This is because they can claim to have two mother tongues. For example, if a child's mother is an Ekegusii speaker and the father is a Boran, it may be difficult to determine the child's mother tongue. Despite this dilemma, the child can speak Ekegusii and Boran, as his/her mother tongue. However, it becomes difficult to determine which mother tongue the child should receive instruction in at lower level of primary.

i) Incompetent professionals

In Kenya the mother tongue syllabus, just like in all subjects, underwent major changes in 2002. Most of the earlier published mother tongues are not in consonance with the new syllabus. Lack of qualified and talented writers in mother tongues has been a major challenge. Remember that not all native speakers of a language are qualified authors or editors of the language in question.

Yet another challenge to effective and coordinated teaching of mother tongue is lack of trained and qualified teachers. Although primary school teachers are trained in over 10 subjects in various teacher-training colleges, mother tongue is not taught as a subject. Consequently, most of the mother tongue teachers are half-baked as far as methodology and content of respective mother tongue is concerned. There is a need for curriculum developers to consider incorporating mother tongue and its teaching methodology in the teacher-training programmes.

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. 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 Kenya situation, there is need to develop mother tongue alongside Kiswahili, English and other foreign languages. As things stand today, more emphasis is on English and to some extent Kiswahili, while mother tongue has been neglected or little attention paid to it. This trend needs to be reversed and corrected.

The UNESCO Report (2002), claims that, almost sixteen (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. Teachers should be trained in techniques and methodology of mother tongue education. This calls for a review of curriculum for teacher training colleges in Kenya. In addition, practicing teachers need to be re-trained through in-service course or regular seminars and workshops.

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 Sierra 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 in the lower Primary School level and implementation of the multilingual language policy.

Africans cannot afford to lose 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".

The multilingualism in Kenya should be strength rather than a weakness. Multilingual situation should continue to unite the various linguistic groups. African countries should harness the diversity of the African languages.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to unravel the challenges facing mother tongue education in Kenya. It can be deduced from the discussions that adequate efforts have not been made to address the issue of mother tongue education in Kenya especially at policy implementation.

The paper supports a linguistic egalitarianism as far as mother tongue education in particular and language policy in general in Kenya is concerned. According to Adegbija (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].

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, Kiswahili and other foreign languages. Although it is practically impossible to offer basic education to every child in Kenya in his/her mother tongue at lower primary, efforts should

be made towards bridging the existing gap. A multilingual person has numerous advantages. As Champion in Crystal (2000:44) rightly observes “a man [or woman] who knows two languages is worth of two men [women]”.

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