

Postcolonial language-in-education policies in Africa: The case of Kenya

Emmanuel Sibomana

University of Rwanda, College of Education

Abstract

The issue of language-in-education policy in postcolonial countries is of paramount importance in regards to their development, social, cultural and political concerns. Due to the multilingual situation of the sub-Saharan African countries and the legacy of colonialism, among other factors, these countries are faced with unresolved questions regarding the choice of language(s) that would best support economic and social development. It is a common practice in African countries to adopt former colonial languages (French, English and Portuguese) as languages of teaching and learning at all levels of education. Drawing mainly on studies which have been conducted in Kenya and, to a limited extent, in other African countries, this conceptual article aims to problematize this practice, to illustrate its negative effects on different areas of life and to stimulate reflection and debate on this practice among educational policy makers and practitioners in different countries in Africa.

Key words: Language policy, language in education policy, medium of instruction, economic and social development.

Introduction

While Kenya is a highly multilingual country with 42 different tribes speaking different languages (Bunyi, 2005; Njeru, 2013), English and Kiswahili are the only official languages. These two languages are additional/second languages for many people because, for many Kenyans, the first language is the language spoken in their tribes (Bunyi, 1997). This means that there are many citizens whose first languages are not officially recognised and used in the most important spheres of life in the country (Khejeri, 2014). These citizens have to learn English and Kiswahili in schools, in addition to, or instead of, their mother tongues, in order to be adequately integrated in the life of the country. Furthermore, all Kenyans have to use the two languages, especially English, as media of instruction. Using the findings of different studies which have been conducted in the area of language and education in Kenya and, to a limited extent, in some other African countries, this article aims to problematize this policy and related practice and to analyse the resultant effects on education and social and economic development.

The English-Vernacular divide in the Kenyan education

The current language-in-education policy in Kenya states that indigenous languages or Kiswahili are to be used as media of instruction from Standard 1 to 3, and a switch to English is made at the beginning of Standard 4 with all languages (English, Kiswahili and indigenous) continuing to be taught as school subjects (Bunyi, 2005; Khejeri, 2014). However, among around 40 indigenous languages available in this country, the initial literacy materials for Standard 1-3 are available only in 22 languages (Mbaabu, 1996 cited in Bunyi, 2008). In addition, those languages for which textbooks are available receive less attention compared to English (Bunyi, 2008; Khejeri, 2014). If it is a linguistic human right in education for one to be taught his/her mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), then many children's rights are being violated in Kenya, because learners whose languages do not have literacy materials are not taught literacy in their mother tongue, or it is taught inappropriately.

However, even for those learners whose mother tongues have literacy materials, it cannot be said that their linguistic rights are fully respected. In spite of the UNESCO's assertion that children should (and have the right to) be taught in their mother tongues at low levels of education¹ (Ball, 2010), "the tendency is for schools to opt for English as the language of instruction from Standard 1, in the mistaken belief that this increases the children's intake of English and thus their chances of acquiring English literacy faster" (Muthwii, 2002, in Bunyi, 2008, p. 150). This, according to Bunyi, is especially the case in private schools which are mostly found in urban areas. This situation is in spite of research and classroom practice suggesting that this approach works in the opposite way. This is because these learners are learning in a language which they do not understand (English) and, therefore, are "fighting two enemies" (the language and the subject content) (Brock-Utne, 2000b) and end up not defeating any of the two. Indeed, Bunyi's (2005) findings indicate that instead of mastering English (which is the intended result), learners who study in a language that they do not understand (English in this case) end up failing to master their mother tongues, English and the subject content. This is mainly because for many African primary school children, formal education in a foreign language amounts to an incomprehensible daily routine of choral repetition and copying from the blackboard without understanding (Williams, 2004).

The use of foreign or second/additional languages as media of instruction from low levels of education is found not only in Kenya but also in many other African countries, defying what is stipulated in their policies. For instance, the national language in education policy in South Africa states that pupils should learn in their mother tongues up to Grade Four and then switch to English or Afrikaans from Grade Five (Dalvit, Murray & Terzoli, 2009). However, as de Klerk (2002) notes, English, which is the first language for only 8.6% of South Africans, is becoming increasingly dominant as a medium of instruction even at the lowest levels of education. The same situation is observed in Rwanda where some parents and many private schools have resisted the government's policy to use Kinyarwanda as the only medium of instruction up to Grade Three (Tabaro, 2014). Many people do not see this practice as a violation of human rights or, if they do, they seem not concerned about it partly, because, as Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) argues, language gets much poorer treatment in human rights instruments than other human rights attributes, especially for linguistic human rights in education. Another reason is probably the lack or bypassing of knowledge in the area of language in education by policy makers, parents and educators, leading them to not seeing this as a problem but as an effective strategy for the children to master English faster. Bunyi (2008) suggests that this strategy might work only for the children of elites, who are mostly found in urban areas, since they have access to English in their homes and communities. However, the same strategy has a negative impact on those who lack

¹ It should be noted that learning in a mother tongue may not be possible especially in cities such as those in Kenya where children come from different tribes and speak different languages (Khejeri, 2014). In such contexts, it appears that using a second language which is 'common' for all learners as a medium of instruction is the best option. However, the teaching of such a language as a school subject needs to be effective in order to equip learners with effective literacy skills in the language which will enable them to use it to understand other subjects.

English in their daily life. The children who lack access to English in their daily life are mostly found in rural areas, which suggests that the policy contributes to the increase of the rural/urban divide.

Interestingly, “even when poor primary school students, their parents and teachers admit that students have difficulties understanding lessons taught in English, they still say that they prefer English as a language of instruction” (Bunyi, 2008, p. 153). This is probably a result of ideological and discursive constructs² which have been built around English not only in Kenya but also in many other countries such as India, South Africa, Tanzania, Namibia and Rwanda (see Brock-Utne, 2000a; Foley, 2002; Pearson, 2013; Ramanathan, 2005). Such constructs include a widespread belief in the superiority of English medium schools over the mother-tongue-medium schools, leading to English medium students having more advantages than indigenous medium students (Mohanty, 2006). For Ramanathan (2005), such ideologies and discourses as described in the above paragraph shape most key sites in the educational arena, including institutional and classroom behaviours as well as pedagogical practices and tools which, in their constant re-enactment and practice overtime become ‘commonsensical’ and ‘naturalized’. In India for example, even though some indigenous languages were developed up to the level of being used as a media of instruction up to tertiary education, English is replacing them and pushing them into domains of lesser power and resource (Ramanathan, 2005). In Namibia, Brock-Utne (2000a) indicates that English is seen as a sign of education as one of the participants in her study said: “if you know English well, you are considered educated. If you just know Namibian languages, even though you may know several of them and speak them well, you are considered dumb and uneducated” (Brock-Utne, 2000a, p. 185). This is a discursive and ideological construct in the sense that educated and intelligent people can also be found in countries where English is not used in learning and teaching. A clear example is that some renowned scholars (like Plato, Socrates, Vygotsky, Skinner and others) did not speak English. Other ideological constructs include that learning in English in early years of schooling improves academic results (Dalvit, Murray & Terzoli, 2009), that English is a characteristic of educated people (Bunyi, 2008; Brock-Utne, 2005), that learning in English is a means to quality education (Sibomana, 2015), just to name but a few. By making or choosing English (a foreign or additional language for many learners) as a medium of instruction at lower levels of education in Africa, parents, teachers and education policy makers are influenced by such constructs and this practice serves to perpetuate them.

The discursive and ideological constructs built around English have also elevated it above other languages in different sectors, including education. For instance, in Brock-Utne’s (2005) study, a Swahili speaking learner admitted that he could not understand the lesson in class because it was taught in English. When asked whether it would not be better to use Kiswahili to teach this lesson, he said that it was not a good idea because English is a language of science and technology. The belief of this learner seems to imply that English is naturally endowed with an attribute of being a language of technology, which other languages do not have. Such belief is a fallacy because,

² Karlberg (2004, p. 11) defines a discursive construct as “a socially constructed way of talking about, thinking about, and, by extension, acting in relation to a given phenomenon.”

as Pennycook (2006, p. 110) notes, “English is a social, ideological, historical and discursive construction, the product of ritualised social performatives that become sedimented into contemporary subsystems.” In other words, English is not functionally different from other languages and all languages can potentially be used for any form of human communication, including learning at all levels.

Furthermore, Tollefson and Tsui (2008), quoting McCarty (2004), argue that policies are also ideological constructs and often reflect the interests of groups that dominate the states’ policy making apparatus, and thus, produce unequal relationships of power within the larger society. In similar vein, Ricento (2006) states that all language policies are political in nature, and often create and sustain various forms of social inequality, usually promoting the interests of dominant groups. This may be the case for policies which promote English at the expense of indigenous African languages. In the case of Kenya and many other countries for example, access to English is a valued resource that mostly the elites have access to and which they can use not only to benefit locally, but also in the global labour market place (Mazrui, 1997 in Bunyi, 2008). In addition, English has become the benchmark against which the level of education is evaluated in many countries (Brock-Utne, 2005) and a key factor in social mobility (Dhillon & Wanjiru, 2013). These facts make parents desperate in their search for the best ways to offer their children access to English. In making their choices some of them end up acting on ideological constructs suggesting that in order for learners to have access to this language and, de facto, to associated advantages, they should be taught in English as early as possible (Bunyi, 2008). As has been mentioned previously, such an approach is actually an obstacle not only to accessing proficiency in English, but also to knowledge acquisition and production by these children. Therefore, as much as English is seen to open social doors to some (Ramanathan, 2005), “it is simultaneously a barrier to learning, development and employment for others, and thus keeps out far more than it lets in” (Pennycook, 2006, p. 103).

The discursive and ideological constructs around English have negative effects on vernacular or local languages as well since these are relegated to subordinate positions in education and professional domains. In some schools, vernacular languages are not only neglected, but also discouraged. For instance, in one school involved in Bunyi’s (2005) study, it was forbidden to use Kikuyu in the school compound, while this language was the mother tongue of many students and teachers. Like in Kenya, this practice was also reported in some schools in Rwanda regarding Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue of virtually all Rwandans (Gakwaya, 2014). As an example, the Director General of the Rwanda Education Board (REB) recently issued a recommendation for teachers and learners to stop using Kinyarwanda at school (Uwishyaka, 2015). Bunyi (2005) notes that school managers think that banning vernacular languages will bring learners to make more efforts in using English to communicate and this will enhance their mastery of the language. Quite reverse, Street (2005) argues, when using learners’ mother tongues is not allowed in school, learners tend to keep quiet especially when their ability to use English is very limited. In addition, banning the use of learners’ mother tongues in schools sends a message (implicit or explicit) to the children that they have to leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door (Cummins, 2000) and that their language is not

worth anything (Klerk, 2002). This constitutes another form of human rights violation because, as Cummins (2001) argues, to reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child.

Linguistic Human Rights and Linguistic Diversity in Education

Skutnabb-Kangas (2008) points out that mother tongue education is part of human rights. However, the United Nations indicates that millions of children across the world fail to receive basic education not only because they are born into poverty, but because local authorities do not allow them to read and write in their native language at school³. One can wonder why governments, which are responsible for citizens' welfare, can refuse this right to the same citizens. One of the reasons for this is given by Tsui (2004), who argues that in language policy, political agendas take over social, economic and educational agendas. The latter come to the fore only if they converge with the political. However, even when political agendas are the ones behind a given policy, social, economic and educational agendas are the ones used as a public justification for that policy (Tsui, 2004). An illustrative example of political agendas dominating over social agendas in language policy making is the one of the former Organization of the African Union (OAU). While this Organization stated that there is no language which is basically suited than another to be a mainstream of science and technology (Rassool, 2007), the organization waited for more than fifty years to adopt an African language (Kiswahili) as one of its official languages alongside colonizers' languages⁴. Yet, it claimed to represent the interests of the Africans.

The use of foreign languages as languages of teaching and learning in Africa is working against language diversity in education by expecting (and sometimes forcing) language minority students to learn and use a new language (English in the case of Kenya) and new cultural dispositions effectively (Terry and Irving, 2010). The need to master majority languages at any cost usually results in sacrificing the teaching and the use of the learners' mother tongues (Sibomana, 2015). At its best, this approach may produce learners who are literate in, and associate with, only one language (usually English), which has identity implications that may extend beyond the individual learners to reach the whole society. For instance, speaking to a journalist, one parent in Rwanda lamented:

I sent my two children to an English based school, because it has become a fashion. But I am now paying the cost. They refused to greet their grandfather because he could not speak English (Tabaro, 2013).

These remarks illustrate how education can bring people to lose identity instead of helping them to reinforce and commit to it. Commenting on this issue, Cummins (2001) states that systems which, intentionally or inadvertently, destroy children's language and cut their relationship with parents and grandparents are a contradiction to the very essence of education. It should be noted that all parents in Rwanda aspire to sending their children to 'English based schools' and some parents and teachers (especially in urban areas) seem not to care whether Kinyarwanda is taught in such schools or not (Tabaro, 2013). Therefore, one can imagine how uncertain the future of Kinyarwanda in urban areas and that of social cohesion will be if some people who are produced by education do not want to associate with Kinyarwanda speakers while more than 90% of the Rwandan population cannot speak any other language except Kinyarwanda (NISR, 2014). It should be noted that such people are likely to be many among future leaders because

³ Available at <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=47693>, accessed on 25 October 2014.

⁴ It is only in 2004 that Kiswahili was made one of the African Union's official languages (Danver, 2015).

they are the ones who receive 'good education'. Therefore, it appears that linguistic diversity and equality in education is far from being reached and so are the minority children's linguistic rights.

Language, education and economic development

According to Ramllal and Owens (2005), strategic human resource development plays an important role in development; it increases productivity at the individual and organisational levels and fosters national and regional economic growth. For Schultz (1963) quoted in Rassool (2007, p. 91), "the economic value of education rests on the proposition that people enhance their capabilities as producers and consumers by investing in themselves and that schooling is the largest investment in human capital." Therefore, education plays a key role in economic growth by producing the required human resource. In order for education to adequately play its role in development it has to be of good quality, equipping people with the necessary knowledge and skills. One of the key factors of quality education is the language of instruction which, according to several scholars (for example Evans & Green, 2007; Abasi and Graves, 2008; Williams, 2011; Brock-Utne, 2012, 2014), impacts on development and knowledge production. As underscored by Rassool (2007, p. 15), "the significance of language in development lies in the fact that it provides the medium through which skills and knowledge are acquired, and is therefore central to the concept of human resource development."

In a bid to enhance development after decolonization, African "national leaders were influenced by the widely held belief that the best way to quick progress was to adopt or maintain the so-called 'already developed' colonial languages, as the exclusive media of instruction" (Mateene, 1999 cited in Rassool, 2007, p. 86). However, as Rassool (2007) goes on to argue, retaining ex-colonial languages as media of official discourse did not empower post-colonial societies, nor did it facilitate their integration into the international system of nations as state partners as a tiny number of people had access to these languages. Furthermore, even the level of proficiency that these people have in these languages is not always good. For instance, French has been used as a medium of instruction in Rwanda for more than 50 years, but only 6% of the Rwandan population self-reported literate in French (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda – NISR, 2014) and many of these, according to McGreal (2009), speak 'passable French'. Therefore, using foreign languages as media of instruction at low levels of education may have a negative impact on the education quality. In addition, these colonial languages act as powerful screening mechanisms with regard to appropriate levels of cultural capital to be exchanged within the labor market. In other words, as Rassool (2007) argues, while language in itself is not responsible for national development or under-development, it contributes greatly to the cultural capital that a society has available to exchange within the global labor market.

As has been mentioned previously, the Kenyan language-in-education policy states that indigenous languages or Kiswahili are supposed to be the media of instruction in Standards 1-3, while English is used from Standard 4 onwards. Nevertheless, some schools would start using English as early as Standard 1. As noted by Bunyi (2005), by the time they reached Standard 4, learners in many schools in Kenya, especially in rural areas, have not mastered

the mechanisms of reading and, therefore, were not able to read on their own in their mother tongues, Kiswahili and in English. For instance, in one Standard 4 class when learners were reading aloud, Bunyi noted that one of the girls had the wrong Kiswahili textbook open and was 'reading' from it, along with the others. On another occasion, she saw another student pointing the finger at what was supposed to be read pretending to follow the teacher's reading. However this learner was pointing at wrong lines. If these students could not read on their own, they are unlikely to benefit a lot from other subjects that are now taught in English, a foreign language to them. In this case, instead of being a medium of instruction English becomes 'a medium of destruction' (Bloch, 2002).

With reference to learners' readiness and confidence to use English as a medium of instruction in Kenyan schools, Muthui (2002, in Bunyi,2005), indicates that the Standard 6 learners who were interviewed admitted having problems in following instructions in English. Bunyi (2005) also found that more than 50% of the children who enter Standard 1 in Kenya drop out of school before finishing Standard 8. While the government blames these high school drop-out rates on high levels of poverty, Bunyi suggests that unsuitable language practices in Kenyan classroom especially in rural areas, play a considerable role in pushing marginalized children out of school. These practices, according to Bunyi, include linguistic routines, choral responses in all lessons, chaotic code-switching, learning in a language that learners do not understand, to name but a few. As she goes on to argue, if children fail to understand what they are learning, they are likely to "disengage from their lessons and subsequently drift out of school" (2005, p. 148). However, even those who remain in schools receive poor quality education. For instance, in 1998, 35% of Kenyan Standard 6 children failed to achieve the minimum English reading mastery or the ability to recognize the alphabet and simple English words (Bunyi, 2005). Furthermore, 77% of Standard 6 pupils in Kenya have not achieved the desirable level of mastery defined as the mastery necessary for successful learning in Standard 7 (UNESCO, 2001, in Bunyi, 2005). This situation is not very different from the one observed in Rwanda by USAID (2012) in 42 primary schools across the country: 98% of Grade 6 students involved in the research could not respond to more than half of a Grade 2-3 comprehension questions and 62% were unable to respond to even a single question correctly. In the case of Kenya, Bunyi (2005) suggests that the main cause (though not the only one) of these challenges is the language of instruction that learners are not familiar with. This situation is a threat to knowledge acquisition, production and dissemination in this country, because some people's intellectual potentials are inhibited.

Lysandrou and Lysandrou (2003 as cited in Pennycook, 2006, p.102), refer to the phenomenon described in the above paragraph when they state that "the embrace of the English language is to the detriment of the majority of communities as it contributes to their systematic dispossession." So if the great majority of the population does not have access to the tools of self and national development, there are few possibilities for these people to contribute to their countries' development. I suggest that this is one of the causes of under-development in post-colonial societies. In fact, as was previously stated, the embrace of English opens opportunity doors for very few people while shutting these doors to the great majority of the population of these countries. In order to address this situation, learners'

mother tongues or the languages they know best should be used as a media of instruction. At the same time, the teaching of English as a subject should be improved to offer them access to proficiency in English and to the opportunities that come along with it. As Williams (2004) notes, effective teaching of English as a subject in African primary school contexts is a project that merits renewed attention, and which, if properly addressed, might assuage the fears of parents who worry that their children may fail to master this potential passport to a white-collar job.

Language as a Cultural Resource

One of the scholars who explained the relationship between language and culture is Franz Boas. He argues that language is so complexly intertwined with culture, that language and culture must have evolved together, influencing one another in the process and ultimately shaping what it means to be human.⁵ According to Terry and Irving (2010), it is impossible to separate language and culture; one cannot be defined without the other and in order to participate fully in a culture, one must learn that culture's language. It follows then that if one wants to preserve culture, one has to preserve the language which embeds it. Similarly, the best way to access a given culture is through the language associated with it. Unfortunately, Skutnabb-Kangas (2001) notes, languages are today being murdered than ever before in human history and educational systems are among the most important agents in this murder. This scholar points out that "formal education is today often forcibly transferring children of one [linguistic] group to another group" (p. 201), bringing them to reject their languages. He also points out that minority languages do not enjoy the same rights as majority languages and that there are both physical and psychological punishments for using one's mother tongue in some schools, as has been previously mentioned. In such a case, minority languages run the risk of dying because they are likely not to have first language speakers among future generations. This is especially the case for the urban areas which are mainly populated by the elites who will have a big stake in making decisions and plans for the future of our communities. This means that cultural aspects and 'knowledges' associated with these languages (oral tradition, values, morals, etc.) are dying as well. It is in this context that Rasool points out that colonial education did not only marginalize local languages but it also undermined the social and cultural experiences of learners by taking place in "languages that were not an integral part of the social character" (Rasool, 2007, p. 95).

As a solution, Cummins (2000) asserts that we need to stop seeing culturally and linguistically diverse children as 'a problem to be solved' and instead open our eyes to the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources they bring from their homes to our schools and societies if we want the cultural, linguistic and intellectual capital of our societies to increase dramatically. In other words, children's mother tongues should not be considered as a threat to the development of proficiency in English and neglected at school but exploited as learning resources and tools to preserve their cultures and associated 'knowledges'.

⁵ Available at <http://sciencewhynot.blogspot.com/2009/03/language-is-culture-and-culture-is.html>, accessed on 02 December 2014.

The tension between global and local concerns

One other challenge faced in choosing the language to be used as a medium of instruction in many developing countries is the tension between local and global concerns. In fact, while the local concerns (preservation of mother tongues and culture and internal communication, etc.) can and are best addressed by the mastery and use of local languages, global concerns such as travel, education, global scholarship, trade, international cooperation, etc. are best addressed by international languages, notably English. This is because developing countries are locked into the international system and their languages do not often cross their borders. For instance, many post colonial countries are members of various regional and international organizations and these do not use local languages but international ones. For the case of Kenya, this country is a member of the East African Community (EAC), the Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Common Wealth, the African Union, the United Nations Organizations, etc. and none of these organizations has an African language as an official language⁶; they all use ex-colonial languages such as English and French. Thus the mastery of these languages, especially English, is a must for the citizens of developing countries.

The current global need for proficiency in English cannot be overemphasized. This language is a medium of instruction in many prominent educational systems and is associated with power, prestige and decent jobs, among other advantages (Altbach, 2004) and, according to UNESCO (2009), English is a leading language for communication and publication globally. In fact, as Phillipson (1997, p. 5), citing Burchfield (1985), argues, “English has become a lingua franca to the point that any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English.” Therefore, as Rassool (2007, p. 96) suggests, “education for development does need to take account also of the significant role that some languages, notably English, play within the global cultural economy.” Governments and parents have understood this and are trying all possible ways in order to help learners to develop proficiency in this language, notably by adopting English as a medium of instruction straight from preschool.

It has been repeatedly stressed in this article that adopting English as a medium of instruction from lower levels of education as a strategy to offer learners access to proficiency in English has been found problematic and ineffective. In addition to not achieving the much wanted proficiency, this strategy seems to bypass local concerns because, in the current state of affairs, English (or any other ex-colonial language such as French, Portuguese or Spanish) cannot suffice to cater for internal communication among citizens in post-colonial countries. This is because, as was stated earlier, these languages are only spoken by very few people in these countries. For instance, only 7% of the Rwandan population self-reported being literate in English in 2012 (NISR, 2014) and this literacy rate was self-reported and was “not verified through a literacy test or similar means” (NISR, 2014, p. 43). This remark suggests that the number of actual literate people in English may be even lower.

⁶ The only exception is the East African Community which has adopted Kiswahili as one of its official languages. However, English is the dominant language of all the Organization’s meetings and communications.

In Namibia, only 1% of the population spoke English in 2000 while this language was an official language and a medium of instruction in many schools in this country (Brock-Utne, 2000a). Surprisingly, “there are [then] daily newspapers and an abundance of magazines, but hardly any newspaper or magazines are published in Namibian languages” (Brock-Utne, 2000a, p. 208). This situation implies that very few people (usually the elite) have access to the information published in these newspapers while others are kept under-informed of what is happening in their country. In 2000, less than 5% of the population had some knowledge of English in Tanzania (Brock-Utne, 2000a). In addition to the limited number of people who are able to use English in African countries, the quality of English that many Africans have access to is not good as is the case in South Africa (Foley, 2002), Tanzania (Brock-Utne, 2000a) and Rwanda (Pearson, 2013). This actually suggests that even the global concerns may not be addressed effectively for these people and that leaving African languages to embrace English may result in not being able to use either language fluently.

Conclusion and implications

The discussion offered in this article suggests that using English as a medium of instruction at low levels of education is detrimental to quality education especially for children in rural areas where the use of English in the community is limited. The discussion also challenges the commonly held belief that using English as a medium of instruction at lower levels of education is a good strategy to develop learners’ proficiency in this language. It also challenges education policy makers to design educational systems which can attend to both global and local concerns effectively. In other words, those education systems may ensure access to curriculum, fluency and effective literacy knowledge and skills in both majority and minority languages. Such systems need to be able to teach all school subjects, including English and local languages, effectively. In order for this to be possible, educational policy makers should consider the findings of various studies in the area of language and education and make policies which allow learners to learn all school subjects (except languages) in (a) language(s) which they understand best. In the context of Kenya and many other African countries, this language is usually not English (or any other colonial language) but learners’ mother tongues. In this way, the medium of instruction will not be a barrier to accessing curriculum as is the case with many primary and high school learners in many African countries (Williams, 2011; Brock-Utne, 2012, 2014). In addition, Skutnabb-Kangas (2008) points out that many studies have shown that the longer the mother tongue remains the main medium of education, the better minority children learn the dominant language (English in this case) and other subjects. Thus, using learners’ mother tongues will not only enable learners to benefit a great deal from the curriculum but will also contribute to them accessing the much needed proficiency in English, which will enhance the countries’ human resource and economic development. Local languages and related cultures will also be preserved, and the respect of children’s linguistic rights and the right to quality education will be enhanced.

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