

Language of Instruction and its Impact on Quality of Education in Secondary Schools: Experiences from Morogoro Region, Tanzania

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess teacher, student and parent opinions on the impact of language of instruction on students' understanding during instruction. Also it sought to know whether they preferred a different language to be used as a medium of instruction in Tanzania secondary schools. The study adopted a cross-sectional research design. This study used questionnaire, observation and one to one interview. The questionnaire was administered to teachers and students while face to face interview was conducted to parents. This study involved 408 respondents. It was found that 69.5% of students could not understand when taught in English language through classes. Also 78.9% of teachers said that English language was a setback to a student academic achievement. Surprisingly, 64.5% of teachers, 53% of parents and 78.1% of student respondents preferred teachers to use English as a language of teaching and evaluation. In the mean time, 71.4% of students felt that it was better for teachers to use both Swahili and English during classes. This study recommends the use of both, English and Swahili in teaching and evaluation, that is, students should write their exams in either of the languages. The study concludes that using English language as a medium of instruction contributes to poor academic performance among students, thus resulting in poor quality education.

Key words: Language of instruction, English, Swahili

Introduction

For years now, there has been an ad hoc and/or sporadic debate on the appropriate language of instruction at all levels of education in Tanzania. Tanzania uses Swahili as a medium of instruction at primary school level and English is taught as a subject at this level. The learners then find themselves using English as a medium of instruction at next levels, secondary schools and when they join university. The model for language of instruction used in Tanzania is maintenance model.

Many studies have been conducted to measure student's academic achievement in relation to his/her proficiency in a language of instruction. Most of these conclude that proficiency in the language of instruction (English) has impact on the learner's academic performance (see Fakeye and Ogunsiji, 2009; Maleki and Zangani, 2007; Wait and Gressel, 2009; Qorro, (1999), Howie, 2002, Komba et al., 2012 & Feast, 2002). Other studies argue that language of instruction proficiency has no impact on student's academic achievement (Wille, 2006; 2003; Fakeye, 2009), who had the purpose of looking at the relationship between the language of instruction proficiency to secondary school students in relation to their academic achievement they found that the data did not support that Language Assessment Scales (LAS) did predict academic success of the learners (see, also Kadege, 2003). Moreover, studies show that where there is dominance of ethnic language outside classroom, the development of English language as a medium of instruction has been difficult even to teachers (Probyn, 2002). Additionally, studies in South Africa show that there are instances where students discuss in the home language and then they give feedback in English language. Also some teachers tend to encourage students to use English only while some teachers tend to use home language during entire classes to promote effective participation of the learners, mainly, when teachers use the learner centred approach in teaching. In the mean time, some teachers use home language only as a tool for scaffolding (Probyn, 1995, 2001, 2002)

In Tanzania, Hakielimu (2008) established that primary and secondary schools learners were more comfortable reading Swahili text than English ones. Similar, findings were documented by Roy-compbell and Qorro (1987) who reported that 95% could only understand English language written text only when helped with instructors. Criper and Dodd (1984) found that much of teaching in secondary schools was in Swahili. Another study reported that both English and Swahili were equally difficult for students to understand (Kadege, 2003). Other studies established that students understood better when taught in Swahili than in English (see Galabawa &

Lwaitama, 2005; Mwinsheikhe, 2003) Qorro (2005) reported that the parents preferred English to be used as a medium of instruction in secondary schools. As it is, most of these studies suggest Swahili language to be used as a medium of instruction based on findings, which showed that students understand better when taught in Swahili, so their suggestions were not based on the opinions and interests of key education stakeholders, therefore, this study seeks opinions and explores interests of teachers, parents and students on the language of instruction in secondary schools and it provides conclusions accordingly. Figure 1 shows a theoretical framework 1

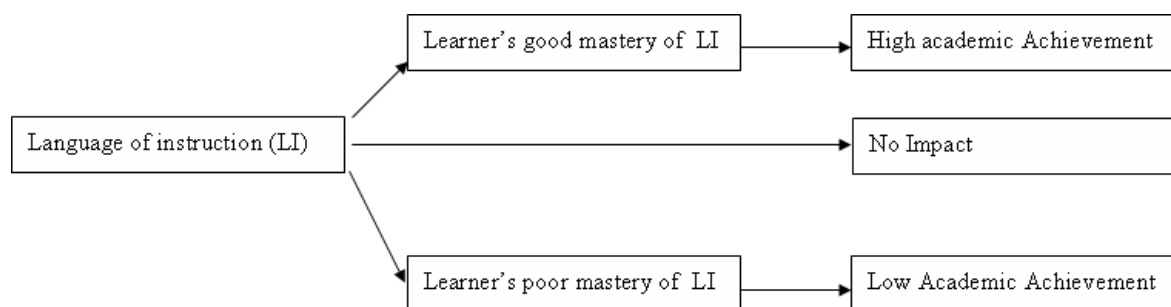


Figure 1 Theoretic Framework for Language of Instruction

Source: Researchers own construct 2013

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine key education stakeholders’ opinions on the language of instruction in secondary schools in Morogoro region, Tanzania.

Methods

This study adopted a cross sectional research design. The design was adopted because the study intended to get opinions of key education stakeholders at the time of the study. Also the design allows triangulation of data collection methods. The data collection methods included: questionnaires, interviews, specifically one to one interview and observation, specifically non-participant observation. Questionnaire comprised of closed and open ended items and they were administered to teachers and students. One to one interview was used to collect data from parents, face to face and telephone interview were used in this study. Observation was used to see how the students expressed themselves in open ended items to determine the level of competence in written English. Questionnaires were distributed to 330 form two to four students and to 110 secondary schools teachers. Fifty parents were expected to be interviewed. Questionnaire for teachers had three items while that of students had seven items. Questionnaire for teachers sought to know whether English language affected students’ performance and whether they thought there was need of using a different language for instruction. Questionnaire for students sought to know the language they preferred to be used as a medium of instruction and whether they thought they understood lessons taught through English language. Interview for parents sought to know the language of instruction parents preferred to be used in secondary schools curriculum. The instruments were pre-tested in one school and they were modified before conducting the actual study.

This study involved 408 respondents of whom 315 were students 76 were teachers and 17 parents. This amounts to 83% of the expected sample of 490 respondents. The opinions were collected from eleven secondary schools selected at random of which five were private schools, five were community schools and one was a government well established school; the schools included: Dr. Mezger, Kigurunyembe, Lutheran Junior Seminary, St. Francis, Askofu Adrian Mkoba all of which were private schools while Sua, Sumaye, Kipera, Melela, Kayenzi and Mzumbe, these were community secondary schools and a government well established school. Morogoro secondary school was involved during pilot study; it is thus not part of this report.

Results and Findings

This part presents the findings of this study. It shows Teacher education and experience; teacher and student language of instruction preference; student most preferred language for teaching and evaluation; using English language and student understanding; what language do teachers use in classes and opinions on the effects of English language on student academic performance.

Teacher Education and Experience

In this study, teacher respondents were asked to indicate their highest level of education and their experience. The purpose of this item was to know the level of education and experience of teachers who were involved in this study; as it is; level of education and experience in the teaching profession may have influence on the opinions the respondents give. It was found that 31 (40.8%) of teacher respondents were Diploma holders; 33 (43.4%) were first degree holders 1 (1.3%) was a holder of Post graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) and 11 (14.5%) did not respond to this item. With regards to experience, 42 (55.3%) of teacher respondents had an experience of one to five years, 15 (19.5%) had a five to ten years experience, 10 (13.2%) had a ten and above years experience while 7 (9.2%) did not respond to this item.

Teacher, Student and parent Language of instruction Preference

The respondents were asked to show the language of instruction they preferred to be used in secondary schools. The purpose of this item was to know whether teachers and students preferred a particular language to be used as a medium of instruction in the schools. It was found that 49 (64.5%) of teacher respondents preferred English language to Swahili since 27 (35.5%) preferred Swahili to English. In the mean time, 97 (30.8%) of student respondents preferred the use of both, English and Swahili as media of instruction in the schools, 59 (18.7%) preferred the use of English as a medium of instruction. Interestingly, 128 (40.6%) were not able to clearly show their preference as they did not maintain consistency in the follow up question in the study. The follow up question required them to choose among English, Swahili and other, all of these (40.6%), in the previous item 225 (71.4%) preferred the use of both languages, Swahili and English, but in the follow up item they chose English language, which contradicted the former choice. Lastly one (0.3%) did not respond to this item and one (0.3%) chose other languages. In the mean time, ten out seventeen parents preferred English language to Swahili while seven out of seventeen preferred Swahili language to be used as a medium of instruction.

Student Most Preferred Language for Teaching and Evaluation

Additionally, student respondents were asked to identify the language they preferred to be used as a medium of instruction and evaluation. The purpose of this item was to identify the true preference of student respondents on the language of instruction. It was found that 246 (78.1%) of student respondents mentioned that they wanted to be instructed in English and examined in English while 63 (20%) mentioned that they wanted to be instructed in Swahili and examined in Swahili. A handful of the respondents, 6 (1.9%) wanted to be instructed in other languages (see Table 1)

Table 1

Most preferred Language in Teaching and Evaluation

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid English to English	246	78.1	78.1	78.1
Swahili to Swahili	63	20.0	20.0	98.1
other	6	1.9	1.9	100.0
Total	315	100.0	100.0	

Source: research field 2013

Using English Language in Class and Student Understanding

The student respondents were asked to say whether they understood well the subject matter when the teachers used English language throughout classes. The purpose of this item was to know whether students understood the subject matter if taught in English through classes. It was found that 219 (69.5%) of student respondents said that they did not understand well the subject matter when they were taught using English language through the period while 96 (30.5%) said that they understood well the content when teachers taught in English throughout (see Table 2).

Table 2

Using English Language in Class and student understanding

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid well understands	96	30.5	30.5	30.5
does not understand well	219	69.5	69.5	100.0
Total	315	100.0	100.0	

Source: research field 2013

What Language do Teachers use in Classes?

Student respondents were asked to say the language teachers used during instruction. The purpose of this question was to know whether the teachers used English language throughout classes. It was found that 281 (89.5%) of respondents said that teachers were not using English language throughout classes while 33 (10.5%) said that they used English language throughout.

Opinions on the Effects of English Language on Student Academic performance

The respondents were asked to say whether they thought English Language as a medium of instruction affected the student academic performance. It was found that 49 (64.5%) of teacher respondents said that student linguistic competent determined the student academic performance while 27 (35.5%) said that linguistic competence did not determine student's academic performance. Furthermore, it was found that 33 (43.4%) of teacher respondents strongly agreed that it affected a student academic performance while 27 (35.5%) agreed that it affect. In the mean time 2 (2.6%) said that they strongly disagreed and 12 (15.8%) disagreed while 2 (2.6) mentioned that they were not sure. Indeed, it was further found that 31 (40.8%) of teacher respondents said that the student academic achievement corresponded with a student mastery of the language of instruction.

It is unlike the student respondents who had different opinions on whether the language of instruction affected their academic performance, while most teachers perceived English language as a setback to a student academic achievement; most students had the view that English language did not affect their academic performance because 104 (33%) strongly disagreed that English language was a setback while 62 (19.7%) disagreed. At the same time 63 (20%) they strongly agreed while 43 (13.7%) agreed and 5 (1.6%) were not sure whether English language led to poor academic performance.

Discussion

As noted in the preceding section, that, 408 respondents were involved in this study. The sample was made by 76 teachers, 315 students and 17 parents. Parents were fewer than expected because time was scarce to interview them. However this may not have affected the results because students and teachers form part of the community. The findings are generalisable because the students surveyed did not only hail from Morogoro region, but to some other regions in Tanzania so do teachers and parents.

Most teachers involved in this study had adequate education and experience. This suggests that the sample drawn from teachers comprised of experienced teachers who would provide relevant information with regards to language of instruction in secondary schools.

Teachers did not use English language throughout classes. This implies that teachers are either not competent enough in English language or they do so to help student understanding as pointed out by most students, as much as 71.4%, that they preferred code switching during instruction because it helps them to understand the content. This finding is similar to those of Probyn (1995, 2001 and 2002) who found that in South Africa some teachers encouraged the used of English only while some encouraged the use of home language only. In the mean time, it was reported that students discussed in home language and gave feedback in English. Also the findings agree with those of Criper and Dodd (1984) who found that in secondary schools in Tanzania much of the teaching was done in Swahili. Also they agree with those of Kadege (2003) who found that the use of both languages as media of instruction was an appropriate option.

All, teachers, students and parents preferred the use of English language as a medium of instruction in secondary schools. This suggests that the English language is still having an upper hand as a medium of instruction in secondary schools. This is because it is a widely used language in the world. This further suggests that secondary schools are there to promote the English language and not use it to acquire knowledge which is stored in it. For secondary schools to be able to utilize the wealth of knowledge in English language, they need to build a strong base of English language to teachers and students as well, which is very difficult in the context of a dominant

language like Swahili. These findings concur with those of Qorro (2005) who found that parents preferred the use of English in teaching because it is an international language as a commonest reason for their choice.

Interestingly, student respondents did not maintain consistency in choosing the language of instruction. Probably this inconsistency in choosing the language of instruction is a result of having great eagerness to master English language, given its dominance in various domains of life worldwide. So the respondents believed that the use of English language is one way that can make them develop English language competence.

As it is, English language was the most preferred language to be used in teaching and evaluation by most students. This suggests that students have one most important latent objective of joining secondary education, which is to promote their understanding of English language. This is so because most of students as good as 69.5% do not understand if teachers teach in English language throughout classes, yet they would go for English language to be used in teaching and evaluation to improve their understanding of the language. It can be further speculated that if Swahili is introduced as a medium of instruction in secondary schools the likelihood is that a good number of students will either not join secondary schools or drop from schooling because most of them go there to get exposed to English language and not knowledge, knowledge appears to be a secondary goal for most of them. The findings are similar to those of Qorro (2005) who found that wanted English language to be used as a medium of instruction in secondary schools because English was an international language.

As already noted most students do not understand if teachers use English language throughout classes. This suggests that most students have poor English language background so it is hard for them to follow lessons taught in the language. Though they are unable to follow, they still prefer English language to be used as a medium of instruction this is due to the language high status internationally. As pointed out earlier, the primary interest of the students and teachers appears to be developing student understanding of English language through using it as a medium of instruction. This is so proposed despite its detrimental impact in the quality of secondary education. These findings are similar to those of Roy-Compbell and Qorro (1987) who found that 95% of students could only understand texts with the help of an instructor.

As a matter of fact, most teachers agree that English language affects a student academic performance, which is unlike most students who disagree that the English language does not affect their academic achievement. These findings agreed with those of Fakeye and ogunsiji (2009), Maleki and Zangani (2007), Wait and Gressel (2009), Qorro (1999) and Feast (2002) who established that language of instruction proficiency has impact on a student academic performance. In contrast, findings from student respondents of this study agree with those of Wille (2006), Fakeye (2009). Also Howie (2001) who found that language of instruction proficiency had no impact on student academic achievement. These contradicting views call for further studies to see why teachers and students have different views.

Conclusions

This study arrived at the following conclusions:

First, English language remains to be the most preferred language of instruction in secondary schools in Tanzania today because of its high status internationally. This is because 64.5% of teachers, 53% of parents and 78.1% of students prefer English language to be a language of teaching and evaluation in secondary school.

Second, the use of English language as a medium of instruction affects the student academic performance, thus resulting in poor quality of education in secondary schools. This is because as over 69% of students say they usually do not understand if teachers use English throughout classes while 43.4% of teachers strongly agreed and 35.5% agreed that English language as a medium of instruction affects the student academic achievement, which amounts to 78.9% of teachers who perceive English language as a setback in a student academic achievement.

Third, in all schools private and public teachers do not use English language throughout classes because 89.5% of student respondents observe that teachers do not use English language throughout classes.

Recommendations

As far as this study is concerned, the English language remains to have an upper hand as a medium of instruction in secondary schools in Tanzania, in the mean time; students do not understand well the subject matter taught in English. Since a good number of students, 71.4%, prefer code switching to enhance understanding during instruction, therefore: on one hand, it is recommended to use both languages as media of instruction and the students to be allowed to write their exams in either of the languages. In other words, the use of both languages and letting the learners to write exams in the language of their choice will take us to the right track as a nation on which language to be used as a medium of instruction and evaluation, most importantly, we will be able to do justice to the 20% of students who want to be taught in Swahili and examined in it. On the other hand, it is recommended to undertake a longitudinal study using selected subjects and schools where some subjects may be

taught in Swahili, History, for instance, to compare a student performance before and after the use of Swahili as a medium of instruction in the respective subject(s). A study is needed to know why teacher and student opinions differ on whether English language affects a student performance.

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