

# The relevance of the language policy for instruction and assessment of secondary education in Tanzania: A comparative analysis between the former Swahili and English medium students

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that effective education in a knowledge society cannot be realized unless the issue of the policy of the language of instruction and assessment is resolved. This study discusses the relevance of the language policy currently in use for instruction and assessment of Ordinary Secondary Education in Tanzania. It also presents the research findings on the extent to which the language policy has passed a barrier towards students' performance and effective learning in post primary level. Data were collected through interviews, observation checklist and administering a test in English and Biology subjects to Form One students. Students who sat for the tests were purposively selected. The first group included 250 students who studied in English medium primary schools where English was a medium of instruction and the second group was 250 students who studied in Swahili medium primary schools where Swahili was a medium of instruction. Findings revealed that students who scored above 70 marks, the former English medium students had 78% in Biology and 87% in English test while the former Swahili medium students had 15% in Biology and 12% in English test. It was also revealed that 90% of the former English medium students were able to use computer technology in accessing learning materials written in English language compared to a few (0.5%) of the former Swahili medium students. The paper recommend that there is a need to remove the obstacle in Education and Training Policy and allow the establishment of government and private secondary schools which will be free to use English or Swahili as a medium of instruction and assessment. However Swahili and English subject should remain as compulsory subjects.

**Keywords:** Education policy, Education and Training policy, English medium, Swahili medium, students' performance.

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## INTRODUCTION

For decades now the discourse on the language policies in Tanzania has been in focal point of the debate, but unfortunately it does not receive the attention it deserves (Kadege, 2006). The relationship between the language of instruction and students' performance has been the most puzzling issue for five decades in Tanzania. On one hand educational planners and policy makers assume that, students who transit to secondary school after completing seven years of primary schooling in Tanzania

possess sufficient knowledge of English to enable them to learn through English as the medium of instruction in secondary school (Qorro, 2006). On the other hand educationists and researchers argue that, English language is a major cause of poor quality of education in Tanzania because students are taught in a language they do not understand. They assume that, the decision on the language of instruction in Tanzania is influenced by social political factors rather than educational and not based on

pedagogical limitations. Most of researchers, therefore, suggest that Swahili medium should take off because English is detrimental in education system (Qorro, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2006; Tilya, 2006; Alphonse, 2006; Galabawa and Lwaitama, 2006; Kadege, 2006).

Although most of the writings on the language policy in Tanzania have converged towards the justification of the uselessness of English language in classroom instruction and assessment, such justification shedding some light on the tension between English and Swahili languages. In reality the global explosion of knowledge and technology advancement has led to unavoidable influence of English language in dissemination of information.

The concern about language of communication is not mere academic exercise, as the digitization of information and the associated pervasiveness of the internet are facilitating a new intensity in the application of knowledge in educational matters, to the extent that it has become the predominant factor in the learning and assessment. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are also facilitating a rapid globalization of economic activity which has been paralleled by a growth in concern about facility in the languages. A language which would provide a student with opportunity to access and retrieve information from computer system or website. It is for this reason policy makers have to make a user-friendly language policy to help students in learning, acquisition of knowledge and avoid the problem of under achievement in students' performance.

### **Background of the study**

English as a language of instruction in Tanzania emanated from the colonial power which existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During this period Swahili remained as the language of instruction and assessment for five years of primary school, yet English became the language of instruction and assessment for the final three years of primary school and throughout secondary school. Among Tanzania's major education reforms after independence was the enactment of the 1962 Education Act that made Swahili the language of instruction and assessment in the primary education. The current Education and Training Policy (ETP, 1995) stipulates that, the medium of instruction in primary school will be Swahili, and English language will be a compulsory subject. The policy further stipulates that, from secondary to tertiary levels the medium of instruction should be English. In addition to that, teaching and learning materials for secondary and tertiary levels will be available in English. However, both English and Swahili subjects will be compulsory subjects in primary and ordinary level secondary education and optional subjects in the advanced secondary and tertiary education.

Fortunately, the obstacle was removed in the primary

school by amendment of the 1995 Education and Training Policy that "The establishment and ownership and management of primary schools shall be liberalized (ETP, 1995:36). From then on, many private schools were established with the liberty to use either English or Swahili as the medium of instruction and assessment. In the same vein few English medium primary schools are owned by the government. Most of the parents are trying to take their children to private tuition classes and private English medium primary schools at a very high cost to cope with the English language medium policy in secondary education. However, the majority learners from poor families are excluded as they cannot afford the fee and so they continue in Government Primary Schools where Swahili is the medium of instruction. For example, the registration for the Primary school Leaving Examination (PSLE) indicates that, in the year 2014 in Tanzania there are 15,884 Swahili medium primary schools consisting of 808,286 candidates and 663 English medium primary schools consisting of 24,826 candidates.

### **Statement of the problem**

Despite the implementation of ETP that direct instruction to take place in English and availability of learning materials to be in English for decades, many Tanzanian students in Ordinary Secondary Level are challenged by a problem of English proficiency and poor performance. It is now becoming increasingly clear that English language policy is responsible for the problem of under achievement in students' performance and obstacle in accessing of learning materials written in English. In addition to that, there is no proper understanding of subject matter and acquisition of knowledge by secondary school learners (Masudi, 2006; Kaduma, 2006; Brock-Utne, 2006; Qorro, 2006; Kadege, 2006).

### **Purpose of the study**

This study aim at investigating how the English language policy is responsible for the problem of under achievement on students' performance and access of learning materials written in English particularly in a knowledge society where learning material are disseminated by using computer technology.

### **Specific objectives**

Specific objectives were:

1. To examine the influence of English on students' performance in Ordinary Secondary school.
2. To identify the challenges faced by students when

accessing learning materials.

### Research questions

1. To what extent does English language influence students' performance in Ordinary Secondary Education?
2. What are the challenges faced by secondary school students when accessing learning materials using computer technology?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Language involves human capacity to acquire for and use complex systems of communication. Tilya (2006) posits that languages give a learner the primary means of communication and expression of the thought, application of concepts and development of ideas effectively. Masudi (2006) provided that, once a learner has mastered a language, the person is able to benefit from it in terms of acquiring and internalizing the concept, attitude, expressions, and informed performance within the school system and outside it. Qorro (2006) argues that proficiency in the language of instruction is an important matter as it enables learners to ask questions or clarification, discuss a point with peer or the teacher, think critically how new knowledge relates to that which they already know.

Education policy among other things refers to the collection of rules, law and principles that govern the education system. Education policy can distinctively be substantial or procedural. Substantial policy is basically statements of political intention to modify or develop an aspect of education system in a particular way. A policy will determine the condition in which education is funded, provided and controlled, this in turn influences the curriculum, pedagogies and organization of education institution. Tante (2010) found that there was a lack of alignment between curriculum and assessment policy as well as lack of clarity regarding assessment policy and practice in Cameroon and South Africa that is why teachers were not aware that instructional assessment in classroom constitutes purposes of assessment. Tante (2010) recommended that child-friendly assessment policy should be built into the programme in order to act as support to the learning of English by beginners.

In a study conducted by Tilya (2006) on the language of instruction and learning in Tanzanian secondary school, he found that, poor students' performance among others is influenced by the English language curriculum, teaching and learning that takes place in unfamiliar language in the early stages of the formal education system and poor English language competence of teachers. Qorro (2006) found out that, pupils with English language background at home do better in school in Tanzania. However, Qorro argued that students learn better when they are taught in the language they

understand especially their mother tongue. On the other hand Tante (2010) found that, English speaking pupils love school but the risk of them losing this attitude may develop as a result of assessment policy and practice. On the same line, Galabawa and Lwaitama (2006) found that secondary education system in Tanzania experiences high values of wastage including high rate of dropout, repetition and truancy in which more government money is used. These are associated with using English medium policy in teaching and assessment. The economic wise and political costs are also high in producing an ill informed electorate who cannot fulfill their civic responsibility because they are not exposed to the political arena, or become an ineffective loyalty due to the lack of grasp of the fundamental linkage in social economic arena since the language of instruction was not familiar to them (ibid). Brock-Utne (2006) posed a serious question that, what do children actually learn in the schools in Africa today when they are forced to try to acquire knowledge in the language they do not understand? Foncha (2010) concluded that most of government policy on the teaching and learning of English and French have been presented in vague, ambiguous and general terms to make non-compliance easy. They are mere statements of intent, without any provision for implementation.

### METHODOLOGY

The focus of the study was on ordinary secondary education. Simple random sampling procedure was used to select the respondents including teachers and students in selected secondary schools. Homogeneity of the school population restricted the sample to a total of 610 respondents. Form One students were purposively selected to sit for English and Biology subject tests. The first category involved 250 former English medium primary school students and the second category involved 250 former Swahili medium primary school students. Both groups sat for the tests. The aim of a test was to establish the level of English competence following English language policy to students who transit from primary to secondary school. The test covered the topic taught for Form One students as per Biology and English subject Syllabus for Secondary Education. English Language and Biology subjects were selected because through English Language subject, students are taught a lot of vocabulary which are complicated and involve narrative explanations while Biology was selected to represent other science subjects which are taught in English medium and have terminologies which were difficult to translate when Swahili medium was used in primary schools.

Students were required to use the computer and retrieve information on the difference between animal and plant cell from the website. The aim was to assess students' computer skill and their ability to retrieve learning materials written in English language. The researcher used observation checklist to obtain data by monitoring what students did when opening the computers, searching and identification of required information from the website. Some 110 secondary school teachers were randomly selected from selected schools to represent secondary school teachers. They were involved in the study because they are implementers of the language policy in secondary schools. Interviews were held with students and teachers as they were key informer on the shortcoming of the implementation of the English

**Table 1.** The analysis of the former English medium students' performance in Biology test.

	Marks	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	0 - 10	00	.0	.0	.0
	11 - 20	02	.8	.8	.8
	21 - 30	00	.0	.0	.8
	31 - 40	14	5.6	5.6	6.4
	51 - 60	20	08	08	14.4
	61 - 70	21	8.4	8.4	22.4
	71 - 80	110	44	44	66.8
	81 - 90	71	28.4	28.4	95.2
	91 - 100	12	4.8	4.8	100.0
Total	250	100	100.0		
Missing	System	00	00		
Total		250	100.0		

N = 250

language policy and on how English is responsible for under achievement on the students' performance and on accessing learning materials written in English.

### Validation of instruments

#### Validity

Validity is the extent to which findings of the study make sense, or represent an authentic portrait of what the study is looking at (Miles and Huberman, 1994). It is establishment of causal relationship whereby the outcomes of the study are linked to each other. To achieve this, the researcher used various data collection techniques (triangulation). As was advocated by Keya et al. (1989), triangulation helps to cross-check authenticity of gathered data and maximizes validity and counterchecking any contradictory information.

#### Reliability

On other hand reliability refers to whether the process of the study is consistent, reasonably stable overtime and across researchers (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This was also ensured by making sure that instruments were well prepared and pre-tested before the data collection in the field. Biology and English language subject test instrument, Interview guide and questionnaires were pilot-tested in four secondary schools in Dar es Salaam region, to determine their validity and consistency and also to see if they would bring required information and that no question in them remained ambiguous. Then the instruments were refined and made valid in terms of relevance, coverage and consistence. In the field the researcher increased reliability of data by exposing to the respondents the purpose of the study, going over the questions and assuring them with confidentiality.

### Data analysis procedures

Data analysis was done in accordance with the research questions of the study. In this study, the researcher employed mainly quantitative analysis supplemented by qualitative data analysis. Data from interviews and the marks scored by students from the tests were subjected to quantitative data analysis. Data were

coded, quantified and categorized according to research questions. Tables showing frequencies and percentages of score of respondents were presented. Then interpretation was made to reveal the level of English competence following English language policy to students who transit from primary to secondary school and its impact to students' achievement in learning and assessment. Qualitative data were subjected to content analysis. Data were classified, categorized and organized according to units of meaning each response generated. Thereafter, the data were discussed before drawing conclusion. In this study the names of the schools and the characteristics of respondents in some cases during report writing were reserved for confidential purposes.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of this study are presented in accordance with the research objectives. Generally, this study has indicated that poor English proficiency constitutes the factor that influences students' achievement.

### Competence in English language and students' performance in secondary schools

The analysis of students' performance in Table 1 shows that 250 (100%) of the students who formally studied in English medium primary schools sat for Biology test of whom a few (0.8%) scored 0 to 30 marks, 21.6% scored 31 to 70 marks and majority 77.6% scored above 70 marks out of the total (100) marks allocated to the Biology paper. On the other hand the results in the test of their counterparts shown in Table 2 revealed that 250 (100%) of students who formally studied in Swahili medium primary schools, the majority (76.4 %) scored 0 to 30 marks, 8.8% scored 31 to 70 and 14.8% scored above 70 marks out of the 100 marks allocated to the Biology paper. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the performance of the former English medium students and former Swahili medium students respectively in Biology

**Table 2.** The analysis of the former Swahili medium students' performance in Biology test.

	Marks	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
	0 - 10	92	36.8	36.8	36.8
	11 - 20	81	30.8	32.4	69.2
	21 - 30	18	7.2	7.2	76.4
	31 - 40	10	4.0	4.0	80.4
	41 - 50	04	1.6	1.6	82.0
	51 - 60	04	1.6	1.6	83.6
	61 - 70	04	1.6	1.6	85.2
	71 - 80	25	10	10	95.2
	81 - 90	10	4.0	4.0	99.2
	91 - 100	02	.8	.8	100.0
	Total	250	100	100.0	
Missing	System	00	00		
Total		250	100.0		

N = 250

**Table 3.** The analysis of the former English medium students' performance in English test.

	Marks	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
	0 - 10	00	.0	.0	.0
	11 - 20	00	.0	.0	.0
	21 - 30	00	.0	.0	.0
	31 - 40	03	1.2	1.2	1.2
Valid	51 - 60	11	4.4	4.4	5.6
	61 - 70	18	7.2	7.2	12.8
	71 - 80	118	47.2	47.2	60.0
	81 - 90	90	36	36	96.0
	91 - 100	10	4.0	4.0	100.0
	Total	250	100	100.0	
Missing	System	00	00		
Total		250	100.0		

N = 250

test.

The analysis of students' performance in Table 3 shows that 250 (100%) of the students from English medium primary schools sat for English test of whom none of the students scored 0 to 30 marks, 12.8% scored 31 to 70 marks and majority 87.2% scored above 70 marks out of the total (100) marks allocated to the English subject paper. However, results in Table 4 revealed that 250 (100%) of students from Swahili medium primary schools, the majority (81.6%) scored 0 to 30 marks, 6.4% scored 31 to 70 and 12% scored above 70 marks out of the 100 marks allocated to the English paper. Tables 3 and 4 summarize the performance of the former English medium students and former Swahili medium students respectively in English test.

The data summarized in Tables 1 to 4 concludes that the general performance of the former English medium

students was good while the performance of the former Swahili medium students was poor in both tests Biology and English subjects. This may be attributed partly to the reality that in academic performance, students who understand English are in a better position to understand in the learning process understand the demand of the question and are able to express themselves through English language. The reasons for this poor performance concur with interview findings where respondents indicated that the majority of students fail to give appropriate responses because they fail to understand the demands of the questions. On this one teacher had this to say:

English learning environment requires students whose command of the language is good enough to enable them to understand the question demand and give appropriate responses. Most of

**Table 4.** The analysis of the former Swahili medium students' performance in English test.

	Marks	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
	0 - 10	100	40.0	40.0	40.0
	11 - 20	81	32.4	32.4	72.4
	21 - 30	23	9.2	9.2	81.6
	31 - 40	08	3.2	3.2	84.8
	41 - 50	04	1.6	1.6	86.4
	51 - 60	02	.8	.8	87.2
	61 - 70	02	.8	.8	88.0
	71 - 80	25	10.0	10.0	98.0
	81 - 90	04	1.6	1.6	99.6
	91 - 100	01	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	250	100	100.0	
Missing	System	00	00		
Total		250	100.0		

N = 250

students have poor base of English language in primary school, therefore they have less than perfect command of the English language which affects the quality of responses in answering examinations.

The researcher sought to find out whether the English language used in education assessment affected students' performance in their examinations. When students were asked to give their experience one of the former Swahili primary school students from school C replied "Yes, the English language affected me, because I could not understand some of the instructions. Even for those I understood I could not express myself clearly in English in responding to the questions". Another former Swahili medium student said, "Yes, because I used a lot of time to think and try to understand the instructions of the assessment in English and interpret the responses in English. And sometimes I failed to express myself in English". This may be contributed by the reality that most of the students have poor base of English language obtained from primary school, as there were no proper policy as well as institutional preparation. Also it is an indicator that poor performances in secondary schools originated from the teaching and learning process that take place in unfamiliar language at school level. Moreover, this implies that, students who transit from primary school to ordinary secondary schools were forced by the policy to use English language medium in secondary education without proper preparation to effect policy implementation.

### **Challenges faced by students in accessing learning materials in a knowledge society**

Findings revealed that the extent of using the computer

technology in secondary level was significantly higher in the students studied in English medium primary schools than students who studied in Swahili medium primary schools. Data obtained from observation checklist by monitoring students' competence in accessing learning materials written in English by using computer technology are presented in Table 5.

Findings in Table 5 indicate that 90 percent of the students involved in the study were able to open their computers and to identify learning materials written in English while the majority of the former Swahili medium students failed to do so. For example, Table 5 show that 50% of the former Swahili medium students managed to open the computers but only few 0.5% were able to reach the final stage of identifying the required information written in English as 90.5% failed. However, 90% of the former English medium students were able to open the computers and identified the required learning materials from the website. This implies that most of the former Swahili medium students were not able to understand well information written in English. This equally implied that students especially from Swahili medium primary schools were not exposed to learn in English language at the early stage schooling and in fact is an obstacle to secondary school students when accessing learning materials written in English.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Findings indicate that lack of proficiency in English is one of the factors that contribute to stagnating of the potential of Tanzanian youth to learn better in a knowledge society setting. Due to the historical background and its education system, the use English is a drawback for Tanzanian secondary school students. This is because the planning of the education system at the early stages

**Table 5.** Summary of the observation made on students' competence in accessing learning materials written in English language by using computer technology.

Competence assessed	Category of students and frequencies of respondents				Percentage of students satisfied the competence	
	EMS		SMS		EMS (%)	SMS (%)
	Q	R	Q	R		
Following steps to open the computer.	90	10	50	50	90%	50%
Confidence when searching learning materials.	80	20	08	92	80%	0.8%
Identify the correct searching engine.	90	10	50	50	90%	50%
Able to read sentences which direct the reader to the topic under observation.	90	10	05	95	90%	0.5%
Able to identify the required information in the website	90	10	05	95	90%	0.5%
Average	Average number of students		88	12	21.8	76.4
	performance per competence in %		88%	12%	22 %	76%

N = 200. Source: Field data (2014). Key: Q = satisfy the competence; R = Did not satisfy the competence; EMS = English medium primary school students; SMS = Swahili medium primary schools students.

is not designed to prepare students who are competent in English. However, English is unfamiliar or third language to the majority of people especially in rural Tanzania. Therefore, the emergence of the knowledge society has led to unavoidable influence of modern information and communication technologies but Tanzanian secondary school students are not beneficiaries of the innovation.

Students in secondary schools are taught in a language they do not understand which affects understanding and acquisition of knowledge and skills. Seemingly, policy makers were not aware of the psychological and cognitive benefit of preparing primary school pupils for transit to secondary education. Some students lack proficiency in English, thus the ability to express themselves in classroom is partly limited by the use of English in secondary school. This has been a serious cause of poor quality of teaching, low level of acquisition of knowledge from different sources where English dominates to disseminate secondary education learning materials.

Tanzanian students especially the poor and those from rural areas are denied access to many privileges of accessing learning materials technologically compared to fellow students who understand English. Therefore, it is logical to say that effective learning and fair assessment in a knowledge society cannot be realized unless the issue of the language of instruction policy is resolved. Learning in a familiar language is the only way of climbing a global social economical and technological ladder. A learner who understands the learning language will be in a better position to understand during the learning process and acquisition of knowledge from different sources.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicated that, students who

studied in schools where English was a medium of instruction, had performance which was significantly higher than the performance of those students who studied in Swahili medium primary schools. It was further revealed that for students who performed poorly some of them failed to understand the demand of the questions and others failed to express themselves in English. In the same vein, findings indicate that the majority of the former Swahili medium students were not able to understand well the information written in English compared to the former English medium students. This impacted on the former Swahili medium students negatively when accessing learning materials written in English, consequently affected secondary school learners in acquisition of knowledge in a knowledge society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It follows therefore that the time has come for the government of Tanzania to make critical consideration on the issue of the language of instruction for the betterment of education in a knowledge society. The following recommendation has been put forward.

Policy makers should establish a comprehensive national policy which is user friendly to both Swahili and English speakers. Therefore there is a need for the amendment of the Education and Training Policy to promote Swahili language to become a medium for classroom instruction and assessment from pre-primary school to tertiary levels. This will remove the obstacle in Education and Training Policy and allow the establishment of government and private secondary schools which will become free to use English or Swahili as a medium of instruction and assessment. However, English and Kiswahili should be the compulsory subjects from nursery to tertiary levels in both Swahili and English schools.

The government should facilitate Swahili experts to translate teaching and learning materials written in English for Swahili medium students from secondary to tertiary levels. Also the government should support experts of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) make publication and accessibility learning material easier in Swahili to ordinary secondary people.

The ministry of Education in collaboration with the Ministry of Local Government should conduct in-service training to teachers to equip them with innovative methods of teaching and assessment for effective implementation of the language policy.

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## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Interview guide for teachers**

1. For how long have you been a teacher?
2. What role do you play to enhance successive implementation of English medium policy in secondary education?
3. How does student respond when you assign them to search learning materials on their own through?
  - (a) Reference books written in English?
  - (b) Internet to retrieve information disseminated in English?
4. Do you think English as medium of instruction and assessment is problem to ordinary secondary school students? If yes, how?
5. Does English language policy responsible for the problem of under achievement in students' performance? If Yes. How?

Thank you for your cooperation

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Interview guide for students**

1. For how long have you been in this school?
2. What are the challenges encountered when you search learning materials on your own through:
  - (a) Reference books written in English?
  - (b) Internet to retrieve information disseminated in English?
3. Do you think English as medium of instruction and assessment is problem to ordinary secondary school students? If yes, how?
4. Is English language policy responsible for the problem of under achievement in your performance? If Yes. How?

Thank you for your cooperation