KENYAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION:

A WORLD OF POTENTIAL BENEFITS

**Hellen Ondari[[1]](#footnote-1) & Martha Michieka[[2]](#footnote-2)**

**ABSTRACT**

Both African and international second language studies show that children who go through strong bilingual models which involve late exit from mother-tongue (L1) to a second language (L2) perform better linguistically and academically than those who go through subtractive and transitional models in which there is early-exit from L1 to L2 (Baker, 2000; Benson, 2005; Brock -Utne & Alidou, 2006; Cummins, 2000; Heugh, 2006; Truong, 2012). Despite these well documented findings on the benefits of using the learner’s mother tongue as a language of instruction, the debate on the language of instruction has persisted not just in Kenya but in several African countries. In Kenya, English is used as a medium of instruction right from nursery school, or in some contexts from standard four, through university. As a result of this early introduction of English as a medium of instruction, most Kenyan children are denied a chance of developing literacy in their mother tongues. Due to this lack of development of mother tongue languages, Kenya like many African countries has not been able to attain the level of literacy and mass education which are instrumental in socio-economic development as well as in the promotion of peace and democracy in the African countries (Alidou, 2006).

**Key words**: Mother tongue, literacy, Language of Instruction (LoI)

**INTRODUCTION**

There has always been a long unresolved debate about mother tongue education and especially use of mother tongues as languages of literacy, not just in Kenya but in a number of African countries. What should be the place of mother tongue and Kenyan indigenous languages in the nation’s education? What role, if any, should mother tongues play in early childhood literacy and literacy as a whole? When one thinks of literacy, the simplest definition that comes to mind is the ability to read, spell and communicate through written language, but in more general terms, it means being able to view, listen , read, comprehend, evaluate, speak and write effectively and systematically. Literacy can be both task-based and skills-based, where the t**ask-based literacy calls for** the ability to use “printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (NAAL). A skill based literacy on the other hand focuses on the knowledge and skills one must possess in order to perform these tasks. The goal of any literacy program then should be to help learners develop a variety of skills such as listening, speaking, writing and reading. In order to accomplish certain tasks learners will need to engage in many literacy activities on a day to day basis with the ultimate goal of becoming fluent and efficient readers who not only enjoy what they are reading, but are capable of making sense of what they read and can also convey meaning and sense through their writing .

From this definition of literacy, it is quite obvious that education and literacy cannot be possible without a language, and the question of which language is selected is very crucial. In Kenya, formal literacy starts when children begin their nursery school but much more meaningfully when the children join standard one. The pupils are supposed to be taught to read simple stories (narratives) in their mother tongue in the first three years of primary school. In accordance to UNESCO and the Kenyan government policy, Kiswahili and English are to be used in urban centers and other cosmopolitan institutions while mother tongues are used in rural areas. This language policy, although not always followed, is in line with UNESCO (1953) report on the best way to educate children. According to the report:

On educational grounds, we recommend that the use of the mother tongue be extended to as late as 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. (p. 47-48)

The policy stipulates that mother tongues are to be used as medium of instruction in the first three years during which English is taught as a subject in the curriculum. From the fourth year, pupils are expected to shift from using mother tongue or Kiswahili to using English as a medium of instruction. The transition also requires the students to make a quick shift from decoding simple narratives in mother tongue to reading in order to learn through English.

The use of mother tongue as a language of instructions has often been challenged by parents, educators and other concerned parties. This paper will explore the many benefits of using the learners’ mother tongue in education, and especially during the early years of education. But what is mother tongue, especially in the Kenyan context? It is easy to assume that the definition of a mother tongue or L1 should be obvious, but in multilingual communities like Kenya, the definition of a child’s mother tongue or L1may not be that obvious. In this paper we define mother tongue, also known as L1, as the language(s) a child acquires first; it is the language acquired at home and one that parents or closest family members use with the child. We do acknowledge the fact that for children growing up in bilingual homes, it is possible for them to grow up with more than one mother tongue. For such kind of balanced bilingualism to happen, though, the child has to be exposed equally, and often, to both languages so that he/ she learns both languages at the same time. Both parents and caregivers will have to be willing to spend time with the children during the formative years to “tell stories or discuss issues with them in a way that develops their mother tongue vocabulary and concepts” (Cummins 2001 p. 17). In most rural Kenya, where there is linguistic homogeneity, the mother tongue is also the language of surroundings and the language of childhood play with neighbors. In urban areas, this language may be a lingua franca such as Kiswahili, although in some neighborhoods where large groups of people from one ethnic group live close together, an ethnic language may still be the language of a child’s surrounding. If we are honest with ourselves, English has not become the home language for a majority of Kenyans, a large percentage of who live in rural areas. Many families still use an ethnic language at home. As Mugane (2006) says, “ in much of Sub Saharan Africa, English is not well known by the majority of the people – in spite of the claims to the contrary. Many appear to have receptive competence” (p. 15). A second language (L2) is the language learned after the acquisition of L1 has already happened. This is usually a language that is introduced to the child in the schools. Depending on the environment, especially in the Kenyan urban areas where languages interact closely, the distinction between L1 and L2 may not always be clear. There, however, are several rural contexts where the availability of English and even Swahili, is limited that children cannot claim that their proficiency in these languages and their mother tongues is at par. In fact some Kenyan children acquire English more as foreign language than a second language. According to Stern 1983, “A second language is usually learnt with much more environmental support than a foreign language….it is often learned informally (picked up) because of its wide use in the community” (p. 16). How many children in remote rural areas really experience English as the language of their playgrounds, or the language of the shopping centers and market places? For many of them, English and Kiswahili are restricted to the classroom, a situation that clearly fits a foreign language description. A foreign language, unlike a second language, is mainly acquired in the classroom and not much of it is available in the learner’s immediate environment.

**BENEFITS OF USING THE LEARNER’S FIRST LANGUAGE (L1) IN EDUCATION**

Use of one’s mother tongue as a medium of education offers several advantages and there is an extensive body of research that supports this fact (Cummins (1991; 1999; Benson 2004; Lanauze &Snow 1989; Kosonen 2009; Baker; 2001 Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) . Even without these studies the advantages are so obvious that we should not find problems embracing mother tongues in our education systems.

Use of a child’s mother tongue helps students make sense of their reading much faster than when literacy is introduced in a foreign or unfamiliar language. Benson (2004 ) argues that “learning to read is most efficient when students know the first language and can employ psycholinguistic guessing strategies”(p. 2). When children are reading in their first language, they are able to guess word meanings. They can use generalized information about situations and events to interpret new information which they encounter. This is essentially learning from the known to the unknown. Likewise, Benson (2004) further states that “students can communicate through writing as soon as they understand the rules of the orthographic system of their languages” (p.2). Since the teachers are using a familiar language, even if the content that is being introduced is new, children can quickly grasp these concept unlike submersion teaching which Benson says plunges pupils into the world of the unknown, linguistically, academically and experientially and where “students can take years before they discover meaning in what they are reading” (p.2).

Many learners who have been through the immersion experience may still recall even into their late adulthood some of the experiences they had in school as children that did not make sense at all. An interesting example that most may easily recall are the many nursery rhymes that were common in Kenyan primary schools, rhymes whose meanings may not be clear even to adults who sang them 30 – 40 years ago. A number of these nursery rhymes were culturally and experientially misplaced bringing to the classroom a strange culture that was too far removed from the learner’s experiences and way outside the learner’s world. Take for example the nursery rhyme “ Baa baa black sheep” that some of us sang proudly as a mark of our progress in English acquisition. “Baa baa black sheep” hardly meant anything to a 6-7 year old child in a rural village where none of the information made sense. If we raised sheep at all, we did not raise it for wool and could never ask the sheep if it had any wool, leave alone trying to get three bags full for “the master”. Who was the master? How about the dame and the little boy down which lane? Fortunately or unfortunately, we did not understand the language of the rhyme to question the content. So we just sung, more like robots.

Baa, baa, black sheep,

Have you any wool?

Yes, sir, yes, sir,

Three bags full;

One for the master,

And one for the dame,

And one for the little boy

Who lives down the lane

The nursery rhymes alone would be a strong case for the need to use a first language in education especially during the first several years of school. It is sad to think of subjecting little children to such experiences where they are singing songs that do not mean anything at all to them. What if the children sang songs of their cultural experiences? Could those rhymes have been more educational? Would such experiences have allowed for creativity and more creative thinking? Take another nursery rhyme example, “ Mary had a little lamb”, another rhyme which as curious little 6-7 years olds we could have loved to question. How can Mary, a tiny schoolgirl, own a lamb? Why could a lamb follow someone to school? Even as adults from this part of the world, we still do not keep pet lambs that could be so close to us as to follow us to school. How about its wool being as white as snow? What is snow and how white is it? We, however, did not ask these questions, not because we were not inquisitive but because, we did not understand a word of what we were singing. Something as simple as a nursery rhyme (for that is what a nursery rhyme is meant to be) turns out to be complicated and impossible for a child to decode because the rhymes concepts are foreign. The rhymes, which in other contexts, are great tools for facilitating language skills end up being mere memorization exercises.

Bunyi (1999) captures a scenario in Gicagi School, a marginalized rural primary school where the choice of the language of instruction becomes a hindrance to learning. She collected some ethnographic data on the use of English in the teaching of primary school children from standard one to four. In this school, English was a compulsory subject and a medium of instruction from standard four. There was a rule that prohibited children in standard four and above to speak their mother tongue, Gikuyu, in the school compound, but she notes that the rule was half-heartedly enforced because the teachers themselves found it humanly impossible not to speak Gikuyu in a Gikuyu monolingual environment. An interview with the headmaster of the school revealed that lack of proper mastery of the English language was a problem in the school. He told the researcher:

Language is another problem we have especially in lower primary. Because the children come without any knowledge of English, they take a long time before they can understand and communicate in English (Bunyi, 1999 p.343)

Bunyi further observes that submerging children in an environment where they have to learn in a language they cannot speak and which even their teachers cannot speak fluently incapacitates them academically and linguistically. These children not only have to grapple with a new and extremely foreign language, but they also have to contend with learning new concepts being taught in that new language. During her study, Bunyi also observed that in the classrooms, teachers did much of the talking and gave long explanations. Whether in language or non-language lessons, this researcher noted that oral responses were rhythmic and the children often adopted a playful attitude in performing them. Learning was merely a role-play and rote memorization. She noticed that sometimes the teacher increased the sense of performance by pretending not have heard the children the first time. The teacher would raise her voice to say things like ‘ii’ and ‘eh’ so that the children would repeat what they had said. The teacher, as Bunyi observed became more of an actor or performer in the classroom instead of being a facilitator.

Unlike experiences like the ones observed above by Bunyi, use of the mother tongue does not only make reading and comprehension easier but it also prepares way for an early introduction of new concepts. Instead of spending time trying to teach the children basic vocabulary, teachers can go straight into content areas using the mother tongue vocabulary that the children have already acquired. Benson (2004) again argues that the learning of new concepts does not have to be postponed since content area instruction is provided in L1, andteachers and students can “interact naturally and negotiate meanings together, creating participatory learning environments that are conducive to cognitive as well as linguistic development”. (p. 2). Truong (2012) endorses this idea in her argument, “When new concepts or terminologies are defined in a foreign language to students who are studying a subject, they do not learn the concepts” (p. 9). For thinking and learning to happen, and that includes learning new concepts, the teacher and the learner need a common language.

Many people believe that if children are not exposed to the second language, they will not acquire that language (Truong, 2012). On the contrary, use of mother tongue as a language of instruction allows for “explicit teaching of L2” (Benson, 2004 p. 2). Research shows that such kind of teaching gives teachers the freedom to focus on teaching the L2 in a systematic way beginning with the basic linguistic concepts to more complex ones. Since there is no pressure to use L2 in instruction, the teachers do not have to push their students into rote memorization. They can, for instance, spend more time on teaching L2 oral skills before gradually adding writing and reading. In the process L2 is introduced as a useful tool of communication similar to L1 which as we all know begins with the spoken before the other skills are learned.

When children learn in their mother tongue, their confidence, self-esteem and identity is strengthened and this increases motivation and initiative as well as creativity. L1 classrooms allow children to be themselves and develop their personalities as well as their intellects, unlike submersion classrooms where they are forced to repeat mechanically, leading to frustration and ultimately repetition, failure and dropout (Benson, 2004).

Alidou (2006) gives an experience in Tanzania where in an experiment, the same teacher taught the same topic to two different classes of form I students in a large secondary school. The teacher taught the topic to one class in English and to another in Kiswahili. He observed that only five minutes after the lesson started, two thirds of the students in English were standing by their desks. The teacher explained that she had asked them to stand because some of them were sleeping in the class. Alidou noticed that the students in this class taught in English were “silent, grave and looked afraid”(Alidou, 2006 p. 104). The students were not confident of themselves and they were slow in responding to questions because their pronunciation of words in the English language was usually not correct and they got embarrassed when the teacher had to correct it in class. They also did not understand instructions well enough to be able to conduct group activities successfully.

The class taught in Kiswahili was on the other hand full of smiles and much laughter during the lesson, and the lesson went on very fast. The students were trained in skills like combining earlier knowledge with new knowledge. They were developing creative qualifications like independence and critical thinking. They trained in the ability to enter into constructive cooperation with others. The students in this class were encouraged to activate the knowledge they had, build on the knowledge of each other, teach each other and the teacher. It is a lesson of give and take and not one in which the teacher is seen as the sole source of knowledge.

Kosonen (2009) has used a very appropriate imagery to illustrate the value of using a learner’s mother tongue in education. Kosonen compares education to the process of crossing a river and the learner’s mother tongue to a bridge. Students whose language is used for instruction find that language as a safe bridge to help them cross over to the next levels of education while those who are taught by use of a second or foreign language lack that bridge and have to swim or sink. Kosonen further argues that most of the children in this latter group face great difficulties and ending up “repeating grades, dropping out, and basically failing in their education” (p. 10-11). Kosonen, does not deny the fact that some learners may swim successfully to the other side despite the challenges, however he says those who succeed in such a system are a minority and unfortunately these are the ones often used to support the argument that use of mother tongue in education is not necessary.

Research has also shown that children’s knowledge and skills in their mother tongue knowledge and transfer across languages to the school language (Benson, 2004; Cummins, 2001; Lanauze & Snow, 1989). This transfer across languages can be two-way: When the mother tongue is promoted in school (e.g. in bilingual education) the concepts, language and literacy skills that children are learning in the school language can transfer to the home language. Cummins (2001) contends that spending instructional time in school learning through the mother tongue does not hurt children’s academic development in L2 as some educators and parents think. Instead, as he argues “the mother tongue promotion in the school helps develop not only the mother tongue but also children’s abilities in the majority school language”( p. 18). In Cummins’ context the majority language is the school language that children from minority homes have to acquire at school and use in their immediate environments. s continues to argue that well-implemented bilingual programs can promote literacy and subject matter knowledge in L1 without any negative effect on the children’s development of L2. Cummins says that when children are learning through their mother tongue, they acquire a universal or broad kind of knowledge that is relevant and can easily transfer to other areas including their L2. Cummins further argues, for example, that pupils who know how to tell time in their mother tongue have already acquired that concept and understanding of how to tell time. Once they get into the second language classroom, they do not have to be taught this concept again. They only need to acquire new labels or “surface structures” for an intellectual skill they have already learned (p.18)

In contexts where the parents do not have mastery of L2, use of the students’ mother tongue allows parents to be involved in their children’s education (Kosonen, 2009). Parents play an important role in their children’s education. Even illiterate parents can still help to a degree if the medium of instruction is familiar to them. While they may not be able to read and write, they can still ask questions or comment on general topics their children are learning at school especially at the lower primary level. At the same time, parents are likely to communicate with teachers and find out what their children are learning. Mother tongue based education is especially beneficial to disadvantaged groups, including children and parents from rural and poor homes**.** It is often assumed that since English is introduced early in the primary school curriculum, children understand the language and can therefore develop literacy in it. The truth of the matter, however, is that children do not develop oral literacy in English or in any other second language that fast because the environment in which they learn the language is not conducive to that fast mastery. The parents do not have to be frustrated about their inability to use English; they can still help their children.

A mother tongue-based education ultimately helps children acquire literacy skills in both L1 and L2, and in the process this kind of education helps prevent language attrition among children whose languages could otherwise be lost if not used in the schools.This fact positively affects children’s linguistic and educational development. When they develop literacy in both languages, they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize reality, thus supporting what Goethe the German philosopher once said: “The person who knows only one language does not truly know that language”. (Cummins, 2001 p.3)

Where the mother tongue is used extensively in the community outside the school, the language loss among young children will be less. Children can lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue within 2-3 years of starting school. They may retain receptive (understanding) skills in the language but they will use the majority language in speaking with their peers and siblings and in responding to their parents. By the time children become adolescents, the linguistic gap between parents and children has become a chasm. Pupils frequently become alienated from the cultures of both home and school with predictable results. (Cummins, 2001 p.3) Cummins suggests that to reduce the extent of language loss, parents should establish a strong home language policy and provide ample opportunities for children to expand the functions for which they use the mother tongue (e.g. reading and writing).Teachers can also help the children retain and develop their mother tongue by communicating to them strong affirmative messages about the value of knowing additional languages. In many elitist urban and rural cosmopolitan Kenyan families, children do not speak their mother tongues and they are quickly losing them. Communication between children and their rural relatives is therefore becoming more and more difficult. The children are fast losing on the cultural heritage encoded in these languages as well.

Kosonen (2009) sums up the benefits of using the learners’ first language (L1) in a concise way:

• Learning in L1 doesn’t hinder, but helps learning of L2,

• Learning to read in L1 is easier and faster,

• What is learned in L1 transfers to L2 (and vice versa),

• L1 allows students to learn curriculum content from the first day of school,

• Strong L1 helps students perform better in L2 academic work, but only after they have

acquired sufficient proficiency in L2,

• The use of L1 allows parents to participate more in their children’s education,

• Multilingual education (in L1, L2, L3 etc.) improves thinking skills, creativity and

flexibility of the learners

• The use of L1 helps teachers better to assess the real learning achievement instead of

one based on low language proficiency.

• Long-term use of relevant learning strategies support students to become multilingual

and multiliterate (p. 12)

**CONCLUSION**

Although there are genuine fears of implementing the current language of education policy in Kenya, it is self evident that use of L1 or ones mother tongue in education has several benefits. As is always the case, nothing comes without any challenges and use of mother tongues as languages of instruction will pose challenges and will come at a cost, but the results will be worthwhile. The cost may involve several aspects such as educating the public so as to bring about change of attitudes, training teachers who can deliver education in ethnic languages, supporting publication of instructional materials and many more other changes. Many have argued that use of mother tongues will not promote national unity but neither does marginalization of groups of people result in national unity. If instruction is not offered in a language that everyone understands, there is no way a nation can grow, and we can never account for the amount of talent that is wasted due to illiteracy. As a nation we will have to reexamine these challenges and work towards giving our learners what is rightfully theirs: an education in their first and cherished language. As Cummins 2001 says “Children's cultural and linguistic experience in the home is the foundation of their future learning and we must build on that foundation rather than undermine it (p. 4).

**REFERENCES**

**A**lidou, H. (2006) Use *of African Languages and Literacy: Conditions, Factors and Processes Beni*n*, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Tanzania, and Zambia)* A Paper presented to the Association for the Development of Education in Africa. Biennial on Education in Africa (Libreville, Gabon, March 27-31, 2006)

Baker, C. (2001). *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. 3rd ed. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Benson, C. (2004). *The importance of Mother Tongue-Based schooling for educational quality.* Commissioned study for EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005. Stockholm University: Centre for Research on Bilingualism. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001466/146632e.pdf>

Brock-Utne, B. & Alidou, H. (2006) Active student learning through a language they master. In ADEA (ed.) *Optimizing Learning and Education in Africa – the Language Factor* http://www.adeanet.org/adeaPortal/adea/downloadcenter/Ouga/B3\_1\_MTBLE\_en.pdf

Bunyi, G. (1999). Rethinking the Place of African indigenous languages in African Languages

in African education*.* International Journal of Educational Development (19) p.337-350

Cummins, J. (1991). Interdependence of first and second language proficiency in bilingual children. In Bialystok, E. (ed), *Language Processing in Bilingual Children.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 70-79.

Cummins, J. (1999). Alternative Paradigms in bilingual education re search: Does theory have a

place? *Educational Researcher* 28, 26-32.

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire.* Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J. (2001). Bilingual Children’s Mother Tongue: Why is it important in for

Education? http:// [www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/mother.htm](http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/mother.htm) retrieved: 4/11/2013

Heugh, K. (2006). Theory and practice - language education models in Africa, research design, decision-making and outcomes. In ADEA (ed.) *Optimizing Learning and Education in Africa – the Language Factor* http://www.adeanet.org/adeaPortal/adea/downloadcenter/Ouga/B3\_1\_MTBLE\_en.pdf

Kosonen, K. (2009). First language-based multilingual education can help those excluded

by language.<http://www.unescobkk.org/fileadmin/user_upload/apeid/Conference/12thConference/paper/Kimmo_Kosonen.pdf>

Mugane, J. (2006) Necrolinguistics: The linguistically stranded. *Selected Proceedings of the 35th Annual Conference on African Linguistics, (Eds).* John Mugane et.al 10-21 Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Lanauze, M. & Snow, C (1989) .The relation between First and Second language writing skills *Linguistics and education* 1, 323-339.

NAAL (nd) Definition of literacy. <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/fr_definition.asp> retrieved 1/28/2013

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic Genocide in Education - or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Stern, H.H (1983). *Fundamental concepts of Language learning*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Truong ,N. (2012). Language of instruction: unlocking Effectiveness of education and sustainable Development in Sub-Saharan Africa *International education* p 6-20.

UNESCO (1953). *The Use of Vernacular Language in Education*. UNESCO Monographs on Fundamental Education, No.8.Paris: UNESCO http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000028/002897eb.pdf

1. University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. East Tennessee State University, USA. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)