LEARNING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN KENYA: OVERVIEW, PROBLEMS AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract:

Indigenous languages face extinction in the near future despite the important role they play in communication, cultural preservation, and identity of indigenous people. The threat is the direct consequence of colonialism and colonial practices and is currently exacerbated by globalization. Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples guarantees rights to these peoples to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions, writing systems, and literatures. Further, it provides that states shall take effective measures to protect this right, including through interpretation in political, legal, and administrative proceedings. Consequently, Kenya's language-in-education policy dating from the colonial period has been supportive of the teaching of indigenous languages in schools. For example, in the more recent curriculum reforms of 2017, Kenya set out to offer indigenous languages both as a medium of instruction and as a subject right from pre-primary to lower secondary levels of education as spelled out in the Basic Education Curriculum Framework. However, weak enforcement of the language policy coupled with a myriad of implementation challenges have been major drawbacks to the success of indigenous language instruction in schools. Hence the discussions about the importance of the use of indigenous languages in schools are still hotly debated. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to present an overview of and problems of learning indigenous languages in public primary schools in Kenya. Finally, relevant suggestions have been put forward to overcome the problems.

Keywords: overview, indigenous languages, learning and way forward

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1. Introduction

An indigenous or community language is the language that nurtures the child in the early years of his or her life (Njoroge & Gathigia, 2017). This language is from a linguistically distinct community that originated in the area. Indigenous peoples are so-called because they were living on their lands before settlers came from elsewhere. In Kenya, indigenous languages form the lowest group of languages in the preference scale even though the majority of Kenyans acquire and know them well. They are used in homes, in open-air markets across the country, in worship services, and to some extent in pre-primary and primary schools as co-languages of teaching. Despite the important role indigenous languages play in communication, cultural preservation, and identity of indigenous people, they face extinction in the near future. The threat is the direct consequence of colonialism and colonial practices and is currently exacerbated by globalization.

Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples guarantees rights to these peoples to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit to future generations their languages, oral traditions, writing systems, and literatures. Further, it provides that states shall take effective measures to protect this right, including through interpretation in political, legal, and administrative proceedings (The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, 2023).

The indigenous language debate has been part and parcel of the history of both colonial and post-colonial Kenya. The country has had several education commissions in both colonial and post-colonial periods, which, together with the constitution of Kenya have had a bearing on the language policy. Some of the key commissions that have been put in place to review education during this period include the Phelps-Stokes Commission (1924), the Beecher Report (1949), the Binns Commission (1952), the Ominde Report (1964), the Bessey Report (1972), the Gachathi Report (1976), the Mackay Report (1981), the Kamunge Report (1988), the Koech Report (1999), the Odhiambo Report (2012), and the Munavu Report (2023).

The mentioned commissions have made numerous recommendations that have had a bearing on the language policy over the years. Specifically, the reports have shown that indigenous languages are crucial vehicles in the acquisition of education by recognizing the value of using mother tongues as the language of instruction in early classes (Njoroge and Gathigia, 2017). The Phelps-Stoke Commission (1924), for example, recognized the great role of indigenous languages in the development of character and acquisition of life skills in agriculture. The Bessy Commission, on the other hand, noted that there are many benefits that accrue when a child starts formal learning in a language that he or she understands. On a similar note, the post-colonial commissions such as those of Gachathi (1976) and Koech (1999) recommended the need for a child to be taught using the language of the school's catchment area and for Kiswahili to be used only in schools with a heterogeneous population. However, the Kenya language policy has not been supported by a careful implementation strategy for indigenous languages.

The commissions' recommendations are in line with those found in literature on the benefits of using mother languages in education (Kithaka, 2016; Cummins, 2000; and UNESCO, 2023). UNESCO, for example, has been promoting multilingual education as a means to improve learning and learning outcomes and give life to linguistic and culture diversity since 1953 when a meeting of specialists in vernacular languages led to the organization publishing the use of vernacular languages in education UNESCO (2023). UNESCO underscores the importance of educating children in their mother tongue because children are more likely to enroll and succeed in school if they are instructed in the language they best understand. Such a language enables them to transition smoothly to a second language such as English. The constitution of Kenya 2010 also supports the learning of indigenous languages. Article 7 of the new constitution obliges the state to promote and protect the diversity of language of the people of Kenya. The state is also obliged to promote the development and use of indigenous languages.

Language, according to Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), is also a natural resource to be used as a tool for socio-economic development. In this regard, the creation of the current 47 counties in Kenya was partly meant to align the Kenyan education sector to the requirements of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) and Kenya's Vision 2030 blueprint. Vision 2030 is the country's current strategy in development whose main objective is to help Kenya transform into a middle-income country that provides high-quality life to all its citizens by the year 2030. The vision is founded on social, economic, and political pillars. Within the social pillar, the education sector plays a critical role in facilitating the process of inculcating knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for catapulting Kenya to the status of a globally competitive country (Republic of Kenya, 2008). Apart from the constitution of Kenya (2010), the vision is also in line with Goal 4 of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are meant to ensure an inclusive equitable, quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. The full implementation of indigenous language, starting at the county level, would be a sure way of attaining access and equity in education for all. Thus, there is a need to increase the relevance of education through environmentally related curriculum reforms based on community needs and conditions. This environment is in the physical, social, cultural, economic, and political spheres in the context of Kenya's Vision 2030 and the global SDGs, which can partly be attained through the implementation of learning indigenous language with the support of county governments.

From the foregoing, therefore, it is clear that Kenya's language-in-education policy has been consistent throughout time in support of teaching indigenous languages in schools. However, the lack of enforcement means that discussions about the importance of the use of indigenous languages in schools are still hotly debated. Kenyan language scholars have for decades advocated and written about the role mother tongues should play in the country. The challenge has been that those who champion this approach don't control public resources. The result is that nothing ever gets done about it. However, that was expected to change with the launch of the competency-based curriculum already under implementation from pre-primary up to grade seven.

Presently, Kenya is undergoing curriculum reforms from the ongoing 8-4-4 system, where learners study for eight years of basic (primary) education, four years of secondary education, and four years of university education to a new system of 2-6-3-3-3. The new system comprises two years of pre-primary, six years of primary (three years lower and three years upper primary), three years of junior school, three years of senior school, and three years of university education (Republic of Kenya, 2023). Indigenous languages have been given prominence in the competency-based curriculum by being listed among the subjects to be taught right from pre-primary to junior school (Republic of Kenya, 2017). It is therefore important to explore the challenges that have impacted the teaching and learning of indigenous languages in the previous systems of education in Kenya and come up with solutions that will ensure the success of the competency-based curriculum with regard to indigenous language instruction.

2. Rationale of teaching and learning indigenous languages

The importance of teaching and learning indigenous languages in schools in Kenya cannot be overemphasized. It could have a profound effect on children's educational outcomes, as well as much broader beneficial effects on Kenyan society.

2.1 Indigenous languages connect one to the landscape
Indigenous languages come from the land and therefore act as a medium to connect us with the deeper elements and stories of communities and the country at large. The words of an indigenous language revolve around other words and modes of expression such as dance, visual art, song, and symbolism used in communication. Hence language and land are the fundamental building blocks to understanding the bigger concepts.

2.2 Indigenous languages can help find local solutions to universal problems
Indigenous languages may help us to solve problems that vary by scale. For example, while climate change is a global issue, there are applied solutions that can be implemented at local levels to lessen the greater impact of things such as pollution, carbon build-up, and climate shift. Indigenous languages therefore contextualize our needs and provide insight into patterned relationships across ecosystems.

2.3 Indigenous languages expand our thinking and cognition
We travel to different countries around the world to have new experiences and to expand our horizons. On a cognitive and neurological level, we can enjoy the same experiences by making contact with different linguistic concepts in other global communities such as those speaking French, Chinese, German, and many others. A study of a first language improves knowledge of the first language as well as math and logic skills, as shown by decades of studies (Adelman, 1981).

2.4 Indigenous languages help one better understand Indigenous people

Arguably, indigenous disadvantage today has stemmed from broken communication between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in early colonial times up to date. While some early colonists sought to learn and record indigenous languages, many only wrote them down without understanding their correct context. Those who became fluent speakers of local indigenous languages and made the effort to understand their contexts earned the trust and respect of local indigenous people in those areas.

2.5 Indigenous languages promote dynamism and higher-order thinking

Innovation, creativity, and knowledge are fluid and dynamic concepts that rely heavily on a diversity of perspectives. For example, with more than 400 different indigenous languages spoken across Australia, there are a multitude of new possibilities that can arise from indigenous language learning and communication which will greatly benefit communities in that country today. Based on years of research, the inclusion of native language and culture in the school curriculum is an important factor in native American children's academic achievement, retention rates, and school attendance (Lipka & McCarty, 1994; Skinner, 1999).

2.6 Learning indigenous languages is a way of keeping indigenous languages alive

Most indigenous languages are on the verge of extinction. By learning them, we will be keeping them alive, and thus retaining the knowledge that they hold which may prove to be useful in the future, especially in research. There is an old saying, "*when an elder dies we lose an entire library*", but when a language is lost, we lose just as much - if not more. Further, indigenous language is an ingredient full of accumulated knowledge, skills, and values to pass over the rich societal education from the old to the young generation. This may be realized through the teaching and learning of indigenous languages.

2.7 Learning indigenous languages has immense cognitive and neurological benefits

Research shows that second language instruction improves overall school performance, cognitive development, problem-solving, and creativity. For example, bilingual children have increased metalinguistic awareness, or knowledge 'about' languages. These metalinguistic skills are an important piece of intellectual development, reading skills development, and overall academic success (Hakuta, 2001). Also, a study of a second language improves knowledge of the first language as well as math and logic skills, as shown by decades of studies. Children who study a second language score higher on verbal standardized tests conducted in English (Adelman, 1981; Baker, 2001).

2.8 Learning of indigenous language contributes to health and well-being

Current studies indicate that native language is integral to the sense of well-being of native children, and in turn, to their academic performance, self-esteem, and ability to succeed in a complex world. When a school values and utilizes students' native language

in the curriculum, there is increased student self-esteem, less anxiety, and greater self-efficacy (Hakuta, 2001).

2.9 Indigenous languages contribute to cultural preservation

Children who learn their indigenous languages are able to maintain critical ties to their culture, affirm their identity, and preserve important connections with older generations. There is also an additional benefit for students who learn their indigenous language from a teacher who shares the same background, history, and culture.

2.10 Indigenous languages are useful in social, economic, and trade systems

The common idea and rationalism behind foreign-language learning in society stems from an assumption that languages such as French and Japanese will connect students to global futures, cultures, and economies through trade and travel, but the likelihood of those students going on to utilize those languages in a practical cross-cultural context is very minimal. On the contrary, indigenous languages do have a place in current and future social, economic, and trade systems.

3. Types of indigenous languages in Kenya

More than 60 different languages are indigenous in Kenya. The official languages are English, which is widely spoken to a high standard in the tourist industry, and Kiswahili, an East African lingua franca that originated from the coast and spread inland along trade routes in the early 19th century (Discover Africa Safaris, 2023).

Most languages spoken locally belong to two broad language families: Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan, spoken by the country's Bantu and Nilotic populations, respectively. The Cushitic and Arab ethnic minorities speak languages belonging to the separate Afroasiatic family, with the Hindustani and British residents speaking languages from the Indo-European family. Kenya's various ethnic groups typically speak their mother tongues within their own communities. The two official languages are used in varying degrees of fluency for communication with other populations. English is widely spoken in commerce, schooling, and government. Peri-urban and rural dwellers are less multilingual, with many in rural areas speaking only their native languages.

Kiswahili, the most widely spoken language in the country, originated in Kenya. According to linguists, it evolved from a language called Kingozi around the 13th century. It is influenced by Arabic (30% of its words stem from it).

Although Kiswahili originated from the territory of Kenya, the number of its native speakers is estimated to be only around 2 million people. Since the language is taught at schools, however, in its Standard Zanzibar accent, nearly 100% of the population of Kenya can speak Kiswahili.

Table 1: A Fraction of the Languages of Kenya

LANGUAGE	LANGUAGE FAMILY	TERRITORY	NUMBER OF SPEAKERS	INTERESTING FACTS
KIKUYU	Bantu language	Central Kenya: Nairobi and Nyeri	7 million	- a tonal language like Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese - a Star Wars character in the "Return of The Jedi" (1983) spoke a few lines in the language
KAMBA	Bantu language	The counties of Machakos, Kitui, Makueni, and Kwale	4.4 million	- very similar to Kikuyu in terms of vocabulary - spoken mainly by the Kamba people
EKEGUSII	Bantu language	Kisii and Nyamira counties in Western Kenya	2.8 million	- also called Gussi or Kisii
KIMIIRU	Bantu language	North East of Mount Kenya	2 million	- also called Meru - a lot of common vocabulary with Kikuyu
OLULUHYIA	Bantu language	Western Kenya	15 million	- spoken by different Luhya tribes - also called Luhya language
KIPOKOMO	Bantu language	Eastern Kenya by the Tana river	100.000	- also called Pokomo - closely related to the Swahili language – both stem from the Kingozi language
KIGIRYAMA	Bantu language	South-Eastern Kenya: the cities of Mombasa and Malindi	Approximately 1 million	- spoken by the Giriama people
KIEMBU	Bantu language	The central Embu County	Approximately 400.000	- spoken by the Embu people - also called Embu
DHOLUO	Nilotic language	East of Lake Victoria	4.2 million	- spoken by the Luo people
KALENJIN	Nilotic language	Western Kenya	1.6 million	- used to be spoken by different tribes - they united in the 1940s-1950s - tonal language
MAASAI	Nilotic language	Central and Southern Kenya	1.5 million	- tonal language
TURKANA	Nilotic language	North-Western parts of the Turkana County	Approximately 1 million	- related to languages spoken in Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia
RENDILLE	Cushitic language	Marsabit County in Northern Kenya	Approximately 100.000	- closely related to the Somali language
SOMALI	Cushitic language	Northern Eastern Kenya	2.5 million	- many Somali speakers have immigrated to Kenya due to the Somali civil war in the 1990s

Source: Milestone Localization Private (2022).

There are **7** Kiswahili dialects. The most prominent of them would be Sheng which is a combination of Kiswahili and English – the languages on which it is primarily based. Its name, Sheng, is a combination of the words Swahili and English. It was spoken mainly by the young people in Nairobi and other cities. Nowadays, Kiswahili is spoken by the cosmopolitan, well-educated people in Kenya.

Other minority or tribal languages of Kenya include Kikuyu, Kamba, Ekegusii, Kimiiru, Ololuhya, among others. Table 1 shows a fraction of the languages of Kenya. It clearly shows how diverse the linguistic heritage of Kenya is (Milestone Localization Private, 2022).

3.1 Challenges of teaching indigenous languages in schools in Kenya
The teaching and learning of indigenous languages in public primary schools in Kenya faces a myriad of problems, as follows:

3.1.1 A lack of indigenous languages being spoken at home
There is a lack of indigenous languages being spoken at home, particularly among those who are bilingual urban dwellers, where it's easy to fall back on English or Kiswahili. This implies that the much-needed parental involvement and support, emphasized by the new Competency Based Curriculum (CBC), in the academic journey of the children is either ineffective or missing altogether. Parental involvement and its relationship with school achievement has been a subject of concern to education officers, principals, and teachers in the urban and rural society of Kenya. In an attempt to emphasize to parents, the need for their involvement, parent-teacher associations (PTAs) were established along the lines of developed countries. Unfortunately, the kind of role and level of parental involvement have not been well understood by many schools.

3.1.2 The ideology of internationalization and containment in language planning
The ideology of internationalization and containment in language planning adopted by the country dating back from the time of colonial period and extended into the post-independence era is also a major hindrance. The push for internationalization has afforded English a higher premium and prestige at the cost of the indigenous languages, Kiswahili included. Containment as an ideology refers to the systematic process by which policymakers have largely blocked the promotion of indigenous languages into the public sphere. In Kenya, it has been argued, especially by the government, that the use of indigenous languages is likely to emphasize ethnic divisions thus increasing national disunity. It is supposedly for this reason that successive governments have deemed it better to contain these languages and banish them to the realm of private communication.

This lack of commitment to the promotion of indigenous languages, in essence, means that Kenya has neither seriously considered nor recognized the consequences, demands, and challenges of multilingualism within its borders. Further, it has not recognized the various challenges this poses to its national development strategies. Effective language management will aim at developing languages and, as an extension,

create an ideal environment for social, economic, and civic development – an important point that Kenya's policymakers seem not to have grasped.

3.1.3 Inadequate curriculum materials, facilities, and equipment for teaching and learning

Posner (1992) refers to curriculum materials, facilities, and equipment that could be manipulated within a short period of time as physical frames for curriculum implementation. These are any special physical requirements of the curriculum without which teachers would find it frustrating to implement. In the context of indigenous language instruction, such resources include the availability of an indigenous language room. Though not built within a short period of time because of financial implications, it is very crucial in helping the teacher create the desired environment necessary for effective teaching and learning of the indigenous language. Other requirements included audio-visual materials, computers, textbooks, puzzles and games, and real or improvised resources, among others.

3.1.4 Rushed and haphazard implementation process of competency-based curriculum

The process of implementing the competency-based curriculum was lacking in several crucial ways, especially the initial lack of consultation with crucial stakeholders, and the poor monitoring to ensure the readiness of educational personnel and institutions for its successful implementation. This led to poor rendering of practical orientation of the curriculum, and to requirements that were unaffordable to most parents.

According to Fullan (2001), teachers can misinterpret reform and change surface features. This is more a problem of the way in which change is introduced, and especially the lack of opportunity for teachers to engage in deeper questioning and sustained learning. As a result, meaningful reform escapes the typical teacher, in favor of superficial, episodic reform that makes matters worse.

3.1.5 Poor students' entry behavior

This refers to poor backgrounds, abilities, and interests of students into indigenous language. For example, majority of learners possess inadequate academic skills like reading, and interpersonal skills like ability to work cooperatively in small groups, which are key to successful language learning. Students' entry behavior is a personal frame and thus has a bearing on the curriculum implementation process (Posner, 1992).

3.1.6 Limited academic and professional qualification of teachers

Goble and Porter (1977) note that in developed countries, for example in USA all primary school teachers will have pursued a four-year degree course, and in Germany, all teachers will have had four years of higher education and professional training following completion of schooling. However, in developing countries like Kenya, the position varies widely: some teachers have pursued a degree program and training while a majority of teachers completed their secondary education and only attained a certificate

or diploma in teacher education. Wide variations also occur within the regions of the country.

This implies that to a majority of teachers, their subject-matter knowledge, teaching and administrative skills, curriculum development skills, knowledge of students, dedication to teaching, willingness to extend themselves, and sense of collegiality are inadequate to make them competent teachers of indigenous languages (Posner, 1992; Goble and Porter, 1977).

3.1.7 Inadequate INSET programs for teachers

Continuing education should be an integral part of the teacher education process and should therefore be arranged on a regular basis for all categories of educational personnel. Procedures should be as flexible as possible and adaptable to teacher's individual needs and to the special features of each region, taking into account developments in the different specialties and the extension of knowledge (UNESCO, 1975. Unfortunately, INSET courses for teachers of indigenous language instruction in Kenya have not all been organized by relevant bodies.

3.1.8 Negative attitudes of teachers and students towards indigenous languages

Attitude as a concept, though closely related to the concept of motivation, plays a significant role in the teaching and learning of any language. Among the many theories of attitude, the one put forward by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) proves to be the most complete and well-founded. The theory is about four elements of beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behavior, in relation to an object X (a concrete object, a person, a group of people, a natural phenomenon, an abstract idea, or a specific behavior). Beliefs refer to all information an individual has about object X. This information could be objectively true or mere opinions, prejudices, or stereotypes. The information is influenced by factors such as gender, profession, education, and religious convictions of an individual, as well as variables relating to one's character, (personality and relationship with others). It is because of these psycho-social influences that beliefs are subject to modifications from time to time. Sadly, because of the colonial mentality most education stakeholders, including teachers and learners, in Kenya have prejudicial information regarding the potential role of teaching and learning indigenous languages in schools.

3.2 Way forward

As a way forward we suggest that the following should be done to enhance the teaching and learning of indigenous languages in public primary schools in Kenya:

1) The school and teachers in particular should engage students' families in speaking the indigenous language, through homework assignments that require students to collaborate with their parents, or a community member or talk with an elder in the indigenous language.

2) Language planning should go beyond planning only for the official languages. It should consider the roles, levels of functions, and domains of usage of the indigenous languages.
3) Schools should take advantage of the FM stations broadcasting in the local languages to enhance the teaching and learning of indigenous languages.
4) The Ministry of Education should organize workshops and seminars to sensitize education stakeholders on teaching and learning indigenous languages in schools.
5) KICD should work with other stakeholders such as universities and publishers to develop more teaching and learning materials on indigenous languages.
6) More research needs to be done in the area of indigenous language education.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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