

Teachers' Perceptions on the Use of English Language as Medium of Instruction in Iringa Municipality Public Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The study examined teachers' perceptions regarding the use of the English language as a medium of instruction for teaching and learning in public secondary schools in Iringa Municipality. A total of 51 teachers were selected from the three schools involved. The study employed a qualitative approach and a case study design. Data were gathered through questionnaires and interviews, and they were analysed by content analysis. The study results revealed diverse opinions among teachers concerning the use of English as the medium of instruction. Some teachers approved the use of English, while others advocated for Kiswahili as the primary medium of instruction, with English taught as a separate subject alongside others. Additionally, there were teachers who held a negative view of English as the medium of instruction, by associating it with teacher's proficiency, and insufficiencies in utilizing English as the language of instruction, just to name a few. Therefore, it is recommended that the Tanzania Institute of Education consider restructuring the language syllabus for secondary education to incorporate a dedicated component on Teaching English Language to Non-Speakers of the Language. Furthermore, efforts should be made towards the development of a national language policy.

Keywords: Language Policy, Medium of instruction, Teachers' Perception

1.0. Introduction

Education, in many countries worldwide, is undergoing a shift towards bilingual or multilingual models, driven by the influence of globalization. Consequently, the formulation of national language policies and the selection of languages for instructional purposes in schools hold significant importance in ensuring high-quality teaching and learning (UNICEF, 2016). In the context of Tanzania, the matter of the language of instruction is particularly relevant due to the nation's linguistic diversity, with several languages in use (Kinyaduka & Kiwara, 2013).

Language holds significant importance in human existence as a fundamental tool facilitating communication in daily life. Within the realm of education, language plays a pivotal role, serving as the primary medium for imparting knowledge from educators to students, as well as fostering interaction among learners. It is crucial to acknowledge that if both teachers and students encounter challenges in the language of instruction, it can impede effective learning (Malekela, 2003).

The question of the suitable language for instructional purposes has been a subject of ongoing debate in Tanzania, spanning numerous years (Ngussa, 2017). In Tanzania, the officially designated languages for instruction are Kiswahili and English. Kiswahili serves as the medium of instruction in public primary schools, while English is introduced as a subject from primary three to seven. In secondary schools, the medium of instruction is English, with Kiswahili taught as a separate subject

The practice of using Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in primary education and switching to English at the secondary and tertiary levels presents challenges for both teachers and students. This transition leaves primary school graduates with limited proficiency in English language skills, encompassing both speaking and writing. Consequently, the teaching and learning process encounters difficulties at the secondary level due to the language barrier (Mosha, 2014). At this secondary level, all subjects are instructed in English, except for Kiswahili language, which is taught as a subject.

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The adoption of English as the primary medium of instruction in educational settings carries profound implications and generates diverse responses, particularly in nations that were previously under colonial rule. In essence, former colonies now grapple with a significant quandary – whether to persist with the use of English or explore alternative pathways following their attainment of independence (Soh, Carpio, Del & Wang, 2021).

As English is a globally recognized language, numerous countries have embraced it as the principal medium for teaching and learning. This study aimed at exploring the perspectives of secondary school teachers regarding the use of English as the medium of instruction in secondary schools. Specifically, the study aimed at addressing the following questions: i) To what extent are students and teachers familiar with the medium of instruction? ii) Are the necessary teaching and learning resources readily accessible to facilitate effective instruction and learning?

1.1. Review of Literature

Godfrey (2014) reveals an ongoing debate among policy-makers and educators on medium of instruction. They contend that maintaining English as the medium of instruction is essential to uphold educational standards and foster English language proficiency. In contrast, the study involving parents found a preference for Kiswahili as the medium of instruction. This preference stems from the fact that Kiswahili aligns with their daily communication, and their children exhibit greater proficiency in it. Consequently, classrooms frequently witness the utilization of Kiswahili, which

often leads to code-switching. This practice is employed to enhance understanding, especially among students whose mother tongue is Kiswahili (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

The literature highlights that, since Tanzania's independence, English has served as the medium of instruction in secondary schools, while Kiswahili is the language of instruction for the nine years of primary schooling (Adamson, 2018). However, there is limited literature within Tanzania regarding the measures taken to address the challenge of selecting the most effective language of instruction. In contrast, other countries like Zambia have proactively employed various strategies to tackle language-related challenges in their educational contexts. They have developed comprehensive language policies that precisely outline the designated languages to be used at different educational levels, aiming to enhance the efficacy of teaching and learning (Mkandawile, 2011). In Indonesia, teachers frequently engage in code-switching between English and Indonesian languages within their classrooms. This practice has been found to be more favorable compared to exclusively utilizing English as the sole language during teaching and learning (Vujich, 2013). This code-switching strategy is now an integral element of the country's cultural, social, and communicative landscape, particularly in nations where English isn't the native language. The duration spent on each language, however, varies significantly among teachers, largely influenced by the proficiency levels of their students (Suganda et al., 2018).

The literature also affirms that in Tanzania, the use of the English language has garnered negative perceptions. These perceptions aren't confined solely to teachers and students but extend to the broader public. The root of these concerns lies in the fact that, while children typically possess well-developed Kiswahili language competencies, their English language proficiencies are notably lacking, both in primary and secondary school settings in Tanzania. Students encounter challenges in reading, writing, and translating the English language. As they transcend to secondary schools, not only do they need to reacquaint themselves with an entirely new set of terminology and concepts, but they must also grapple with more demanding subjects (Hakielimu, 2008 as cited by Kirui et al., 2017).

While we acknowledge the efficacy of the English language in teaching and learning within the realm of science, literature underscores certain challenges when it comes to mastering scientific concepts and articulating them in one's own words. A study investigating the extent to which Kiswahili is employed by both students and teachers in the teaching of science within Tanzanian secondary schools revealed compelling findings. The majority of teachers recognized the existence of language-related issues when teaching science in secondary schools. They candidly admitted to frequently utilizing Kiswahili to ensure students' comprehension of the subject matter being taught (Mwinsheikhe, 2002 as cited in UNICEF, 2016). This implies that in situations where teachers exclusively employ English during the teaching and learning process, students may encounter difficulties in grasping scientific concepts.

Moreover, various studies, such as Kinyaduka and Kiwara (2013) as cited by Ngussa (2017), have highlighted an interesting perspective. They noted that the predominant preference among teachers and parents was for the English language to serve as the medium of instruction. However, it's worth noting that teachers often regarded the English language as a hindrance to students' academic performance, with a significant portion of students struggling to comprehend it. Conversely, Lupongo (2014) advocated for the harmonization of Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools and tertiary institutions. The goal here is to alleviate difficulties and enhance the academic performance of secondary school students in Tanzania.

Insights collected from secondary school teachers' experiences emphasize a remarkable challenge: the use of the English language as the medium of instruction in a nation where the majority of the population does not speak English. Employing English code-switching can serve as a viable solution to aid students in comprehending the subject matter. Without this adaptation, the language of instruction within the Tanzanian school system remains a persistent challenge (Dearden, 2014). Teachers go further to recommend that, for English to be effective as a medium of instruction, the establishment of a well-defined language policy is imperative (Godfrey, 2014).

Given the ongoing and robust debate surrounding the language of instruction within Tanzanian schools, it is crucial to undertake a thorough examination of teachers' perspectives on this matter if Tanzania aims to achieve effective teaching and learning in both primary and secondary education. Consequently, this study is meticulously designed to explore the perceptions held by secondary school teachers regarding the use of English as the medium of instruction within secondary schools.

2.0. Materials and Methods

The study adopted an interpretivism research paradigm to facilitate the exploration of teachers' perceptions regarding the utilization of the English language as a medium of instruction. This investigation employed a qualitative research approach in conjunction with a case study research design. This approach was chosen for its ability to provide in-depth and comprehensive insights into the teachers' perspectives on the use of English as a medium of instruction within public secondary schools. The study was specifically carried out in Iringa Municipality due to its accessibility, making it convenient for the researcher to engage with the schools and study participants. The sample comprised 51 teachers, with 17 teachers selected from each of the three schools under investigation, and the primary sampling technique employed was simple random sampling. Data collection encompassed interviews and questionnaires with subsequent content analysis applied to the collected data.

3.0. Results

The main objective of this study was to examine the perceptions of public secondary school teachers on the use of English language as a medium of instruction.

3.1. Teachers' Proficiency in the Use of English Language

Teachers employ the English language as the medium of instruction, but their proficiency in communicating with students is inadequate. This limitation hinders their ability to implement interactive teaching methods, which, in turn, could enhance students' proficiency in the English language. Consequently, students struggle to engage with subject matter and face challenges in developing their English language skills, as articulated by one teacher in the interview conducted in School B:

In teaching all subjects, apart from Kiswahili, the English language is employed as the medium of instruction. It is important to note that not all teachers possess a strong command of the English language; only a minority does, while the majority does not. Consequently, many teachers hold the belief that it falls upon the English teachers to ensure students' comprehension of the language used for instruction. As a result, they concentrate their efforts on curriculum coverage, sometimes at the expense of ensuring that students truly grasp the content being presented (Interview with Teacher₂, School B, 17th July, 2023).

Additionally, another teacher asserted that numerous educators struggled to articulate themselves effectively in English, and when they did, their conversations were riddled with grammatical errors. These errors, in turn, posed challenges for students in comprehending the content and the messages conveyed. This sentiment was exemplified during an interview with a teacher from School C.

Teachers have sometimes placed the blame on students for their lack of English proficiency when, in fact, it is the teachers who face challenges with the language. It is observed that numerous teachers struggle to effectively express themselves in English within the classroom setting. Many of them begin in English but frequently resort to using Kiswahili as the language of instruction (Interview with Teacher₁, School C, 17th July, 2023).

The preceding remarks highlight the presence of teachers who had inadequate proficiency in the English language. However, they were obligated to use English as the medium of instruction to educate and train the students. This created a cycle where the students, who were future teachers, also faced challenges with their proficiency in the language of instruction.

3.2. The Importance of the Learning Resources in Facilitating Learning Using English Language

Research has demonstrated that the teaching and learning resources utilized have a substantial influence on students' comprehension when English is employed as the medium of instruction. Results derived from the questionnaires revealed that 32(76.2%) teachers out of 42 believed that the language used in teaching and learning materials was inappropriate. In contrast, 10(23.8%) teachers argued that the language in these resources was suitable. This suggests that the majority of teachers felt that the materials they used to educate students were not conducive to effective language comprehension, as they contained complex vocabulary that hindered the learning process.

In the interviews, it became evident that the majority of the selected secondary school teachers in Iringa Municipality employed teaching and learning materials that contained challenging English vocabulary. These materials often included numerous technical terms that proved to be quite challenging for students with limited proficiency in the English language. As one teacher from School A stressed:

In our school, we have a wide range of textbooks, both purchased by the school and supplied by the government. However, a significant challenge arises from the fact that these textbooks are full of complicated vocabulary. For learners with limited proficiency in English, comprehending the content of these books can be quite daunting. Take, for instance, Biology textbooks, which are replete with a multitude of technical terms that pose difficulties not only for students but also for teachers (Interview with Teacher₃, School A, 17th July, 2023).

Another teacher from School B commented on the challenging language found in both textbooks and reference materials by stating:

The majority of our textbooks and reference materials are filled with complex English language terminologies, making it particularly challenging for newcomers to grasp (Interview with Teacher₁, School B, 17th July, 2023).

3.3. Kiswahili Should be Used as a Complimentary Language of Instruction

In terms of utilizing Kiswahili alongside English as a complementary medium of instruction in secondary schools, the questionnaire results indicated that 39(92.9%) teachers out of 42 perceived Kiswahili as a valuable complementary language that could enhance students' comprehension of the subjects. Conversely, 3(7.1%) teachers out of 42 believed that there was no need to incorporate Kiswahili as a complement to English, arguing that English alone was sufficient for explaining concepts. The prevailing consensus among the respondents is in favour of adopting a bilingual education approach, where Kiswahili complements English as the medium of instruction in public secondary schools.

Interview findings demonstrated that certain teachers favour the proposition of incorporating Kiswahili alongside English as the instructional language for secondary school students. This preference is rooted in the belief that students have a strong grasp of Kiswahili, which could facilitate a more effective understanding of lessons conveyed in a language they are highly proficient in. To substantiate this perspective, a teacher from school B expressed the following view:

I believe that instructing secondary school students using both English and Kiswahili offers numerous advantages. Bilingual education, first and foremost, alleviates the students' challenges in comprehending the language of instruction and the lesson content. Furthermore, bilingual education fosters creative thinking, enhances recognition, and promotes effective problem-solving skills (Interview with Teacher₂, School C, 17th July, 2023).

Hence, it is apparent that a substantial number of teachers held the belief that incorporating Kiswahili alongside English would facilitate students' learning and contribute to improved academic performance. They also expressed the view that using both English and Kiswahili in the teaching/learning process would enhance students' comprehension, given that a significant portion of secondary school students had a stronger command of Kiswahili in comparison to English.

3.4. Effects of English as a Medium of Instruction on Students' Academic Performance

Teachers were invited to share their perspectives on whether the use of English as the medium of instruction had any impact on students' academic performance. The majority of teachers expressed the belief that the choice of English as the language of instruction significantly affected students' academic performance. Teachers attributed poor performance in national examinations to English language-related issues, specifically stemming from students' inadequate English language skills developed during their primary education. According to the 2014 Education and Training Policy, Kiswahili is designated as the medium of instruction in primary school, with English taught as a subject. The challenge arises during the transition from primary to secondary school, where the shift in the medium of instruction is not seamless. This challenge is particularly evident in national examinations, where the language of instruction appears to be a primary factor contributing to students' academic performance. For instance, a teacher from School B explained:

Many students have a tendency to engage in extensive translation when writing, moving from their vernacular languages to Kiswahili and subsequently to English, or from Kiswahili directly to English. This translation practice often leads to significant confusion among students, as their native languages frequently differ substantially from Kiswahili and English in terms of grammatical structures. Consequently, this confusion has a detrimental impact on their academic performance, particularly in national examinations. It also adversely affects the teaching and learning process, resulting in diminished comprehension and poorer performance in examinations. In response to these challenges, teachers often opt to instruct in Kiswahili, prioritizing students'

*comprehension due to the inherent difficulty they face when taught in English.
(Interview with Teacher₁, School B, 17th July, 2023).*

Concerning high-achieving students in national examinations, the findings suggest that a significant proportion of them possess a strong grasp of the English language acquired at the primary education level. In the course of the interviews, a teacher from School B expressed this sentiment:

Many schools that demonstrate superior academic performance are private institutions with students who previously received their primary education in English as the medium of instruction. Furthermore, public schools that excel in national examinations are typically technical secondary schools that attract the most accomplished students from primary schools across the country (Interview with Teacher₁, School A, 17th July, 2023).

3.5. Students' Ability to Understand Instruction in English

Students' capacity to comprehend English instruction is closely linked to their prior exposure to the language during primary education. A strong background suggests that a student can comprehend English-based instruction, whereas a weak background indicates the student's struggles to understand. According to the study, 3 teachers out of 42 believed that their students faced difficulties understanding when taught in English, while 6(14.3%) teachers believed their students could comprehend English instruction. This indicated that the majority of teachers doubted their student's ability to understand English-medium instruction. One teacher from School B stated during an interview:

Many students exhibit a lack of comprehension of the material presented during instruction. Teachers often hear students responding with apparent understanding, yet their actual understanding becomes evident when they are given exercises related to the topic. Their responses seldom align with the content taught in the classroom (Interview with Teacher₃, School B, 17th July, 2023).

4.0. Discussion

The study uncovered varying perceptions among teachers concerning the use of English as the medium of instruction in selected secondary schools. Notably, a majority of the teachers who participated in the questionnaires and interviews expressed negative views on the utilization of English as a medium of instruction. These perceptions were associated with teachers' lack of proficiency in English, the inappropriateness of the language used in teaching materials, and the inadequacy in using English as the medium of instruction. Furthermore, English was linked to students' struggles in comprehending the subject matter and their underperformance in academics. These sentiments were largely influenced by the prevalence of Kiswahili, which is spoken by a majority of Tanzanians, students, and teachers. The students' familiarity with Kiswahili and their

unfamiliarity with English language contributed to the negative perceptions surrounding English as a medium of instruction.

These findings are consistent with prior research, including Kinyaduka and Kiwara's work cited by Ngussa (2017), which identified English language as a hindrance to students' academic performance. Furthermore, these studies also found that a majority of students struggled to comprehend English as a language of instruction. When it comes to the use of Kiswahili to complement English as the medium of instruction, these results align with Mwinsheikhe's research from 2002, cited in UNICEF (2016), which highlighted the existence of a language problem in teaching science in secondary schools. Teachers admitted to frequently using Kiswahili to ensure students' comprehension of the subject matter. Additionally, Hakielimu's study (2008) as cited by Kirui et al. (2017) indicated that students generally had well-developed Kiswahili language competencies compared to English language competencies in both primary and secondary schools in Tanzania. The findings from Kirkpatrick (2014), Vujich (2013), and Lupongo (2014) also support the use of the first language (Kiswahili) and code-switching in teaching and learning to enhance understanding.

Furthermore, the outcomes indicating students' struggles to comprehend English in the study are consistent with Kirui, Osman, and Naisujaki's (2017) research on teachers' attitudes toward using English as a medium of instruction in Arusha district secondary schools. When students lack competence in the language of instruction, their understanding is compromised, which aligns with these findings. Nevertheless, it's important to note that these findings diverge from the present study's results. In contrast, Owu-Ewie (2015) reported a positive perception of teachers regarding English as the medium of instruction in Ghana, from primary four to junior high school.

In conclusion, although teachers held negative perceptions about English as the medium of instruction, they recognized that the primary issue lay in students' limited proficiency in the English language.

5.0. Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, the study has brought to light the presence of varied and sometimes opposing perceptions among teachers regarding the utilization of English as the medium of instruction in secondary schools. These disparities in viewpoints highlight the necessity for focused efforts aimed at harmonizing these perceptions. It is clear that the introduction of comprehensive training programmes at the district level, which target both teachers and students, is a vital step toward enhancing their proficiency in using English as a medium of instruction. By bridging the gaps in understanding and promoting a more unified approach, such initiatives have the potential to foster a more effective and consistent implementation of English as the medium of instruction in secondary schools.

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