

# Lower Primary School Teachers' Attitudes Towards Educational Language Policy in Kenya

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**Abstract:** In Kenya, the educational language policy prescribes that the language of instruction in lower primary school (Grade 1 to 3) for schools in urban areas should be English or Kiswahili. For schools located in rural areas, the language of instruction in Grade 1 to 3 is the learners' mother tongue or the language of the catchment area of the school. From Grade 4 onwards, all learners are to be instructed and examined in English. For this language policy to achieve its intended outcomes, there is a need for awareness and positive reception by its implementers: lower primary school teachers. This study examines the awareness and attitudes of lower primary school teachers toward the educational language policy. A survey design was adopted for this study. Questionnaires were administered to 75 teachers of Grade 1 to 3, drawn from a stratified multistage sample of 175 primary schools in rural, urban and semi-urban areas of Kakamega County, Western Kenya. The results of the study reveal that lower primary school teachers are aware of the existing language of instruction. The teachers feel that they ought to be free to select the language of instruction based on their particular pedagogical needs. The findings indicate the need for policymakers to review the educational language policy as currently formulated, especially concerning the use of Mother Tongue as one of the languages of instruction in lower primary schools. The current framework leads to a differential application of the policy, which in turn may affect learner outcomes at Grade 4, where all learners switch to the use of English. If the policy is to persist, then learning materials and teaching aids in Mother Tongue should be availed to rural schools to permit equitable outcomes for all learners.

**Keywords:** Language of Instruction, Educational Language Policy, Language and Learning

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## 1. Introduction

For several years, the educational language policy in Kenya has taken a multilingual approach to the language of instruction. The educational language policy prescribes that the language of instruction in lower primary Grade 1 to 3 for schools in urban areas is English or Kiswahili. For schools located in rural areas, the language of instruction in Grade 1 to 3 is the learners' first language or the language of the catchment area of the school. From Grade 4 onwards, all subjects are to be taught and examined in English [1], except for the Kiswahili subject.

Although policies regulate the internal operations of an educational system, they often arouse controversy owing to

their prescriptive nature. Language policies will prescribe who teaches in what language and to whom. It is debatable whether the implementing personnel – that is, the teachers – and all the stakeholders in the education system accept the policy. It may also be argued that the instructors find it difficult to adopt an imposed language of instruction due to the multiple languages spoken in various catchment areas from which the learners are drawn. It is further uncertain whether the learner accepts to learn the teacher's language, even if the learner is familiar with the language. In Kenya, this is more so the case because Kenya is a multilingual country with many parts of the country linguistically heterogeneous.

The attitudes of stakeholders may influence the reception of policy, especially with matters of language. This is because languages play very special social and economic

roles for their users [2]. In a study on secondary school learners in Algeria, the findings revealed that the attitude a learner has towards the particular linguistic group whose language he or she is learning has a substantial effect on learning the language [3]. Another study on attitudes, beliefs and practices on language policies in schools in the Alsace region in France concludes that many teachers adopt classroom language practices that are based on deep-rooted ideologies that prevent them from practising the prescribed language policies [4]. As such, the attitudes of teachers toward educational language policy may influence the reception of policy. An evaluation was necessary to determine the implications of educational language policy, the teachers' attitude toward the policy and the actual practice at lower primary schools in Kenya.

Studies have shown that not all teachers implement the policy as is prescribed [5]. Some teachers in urban and rural areas ignore the policy and select a convenient language or one which they think will resonate well with their learners. The choice and practice of language of instruction are largely based on the teachers' attitudes towards policy.

After a review of pertinent literature, this paper examines lower primary school teachers' attitudes towards the prescribed educational language policy for the language of instruction in various urban, rural and semi-urban primary schools in western Kenya, specifically, in Kakamega County of Kenya as one of the regions where the multilingual policy is prescribed.

## 2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to establish the awareness and attitude of teachers of lower primary schools in Kenya towards the educational language policy. The attitude is determined by the teachers' opinion on the freedom to choose the language of instruction, their opinion on language use and learners grasp of concepts, and their opinion on the effect of classroom language on learners' performance and consequent achievement.

## 3. Literature Review

There are several dimensions of language policy. Literature delineates the distinctions between official language policy, general language policy and educational language policy [6]. Official language policy concerns the recognition by a government of the language to be used and for what purposes. General language policy refers to the unofficial approval by the government regarding use in business, in mass communication and contact with foreigners. Educational language policy deals with the use of particular languages as either school subjects or media of instruction at the various levels of public and private education.

The language landscape in Africa is diverse. Some countries have chosen to use languages that were introduced by colonial governments. Other countries have resorted to the use of African languages as the main medium of instruction,

while others have experienced policy shifts between one language and another, or a mix of languages. Just like in these countries, the situation in Kenya in terms of educational language policy has historically been a focal point of concern for policymakers.

The importance of the medium of instruction is detailed in the paper 'The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education' [7]. In this paper, the author states that a medium of instruction has the role of ensuring that learners get educated and consequently enables society to educate its citizens. While using a chosen medium of instruction, educators and learners should be able to attain the educational objectives of the society, do so universally and equally for all, and to do so efficiently and economically.

The work of Stern describes criteria for choosing a medium of instruction [8]. He distinguishes between characteristics of a language that are relatively objective and those which are subjective (or can be varied). Concerning objective characteristics, Stern explains that the language should be standardized: it should be 'codified', 'elaborated' and 'written'. There are two subjective characteristics required of a language. First, it should be accepted by all as suitable for teaching and it should be sufficiently important to be acquired. Second, the language should be teachable to the required standard.

It is apparent from a review of the literature that the rigid criteria set out for instruction are not always adhered to while selecting media of instruction. Psychological considerations and sometimes emotional biases come into play in some situations.

The question of language choice is also a question of prestige. It has been argued that an individual who finds himself in a situation of using another's language automatically submits to control of the superordinate language. According to Mazrui & Mazrui, choice of language is intrinsically connected to power and control [9]. Owners of a selected language control those who have to learn that language.

Along similar lines, Kembo-Sure & Ogechi note that:

*"...the colonial history of Kenya established English as the most revered, powerful and 'prestigious' language, while the mother tongues were to be used for mundane communicative needs in the private sphere (p. 151)." [10]*

They propel the argument that the language policy in Kenya entrenched an old colonial structure, where Mother Tongue is used as a medium of instruction for only three years of an individual's school life. Kembo-Sure & Ogechi advocated that the use of Mother Tongue in education and creative writing should be given more prominence [10].

Proponents of Mother Tongue Instruction argue that change from home to school is bad enough for a child. It becomes 'traumatic' when the child discovers that he is unable to communicate with anyone when he discovers that the language of his home is not the same as the language of the school. Despite this, those who advocate for the use of English contend that in Kenya and many other sub-Saharan countries, the education agenda is majorly driven by

“economic progress and social advantage” as opposed to national unity [11]. This conforms with the proposition of “English as an International Language” that sees English as a neutral language and a positive tool for multi-lingual societies [12]. Overall, language is important for communication, learning and education.

From the foregoing, it is evident that teachers as individuals and professionals will have emotive, cultural and personal biases toward their choice of language of instruction. This may be in disregard to prevailing educational policy. Other practical reasons may influence the choice of language of instruction by teachers. For example, teachers would choose a language for classroom instruction that they feel, if used, their learners will grasp concepts most effectively.

This study, therefore, as part of a wider study, sought to establish the attitudes of lower primary school teachers towards the use of a prescribed policy for the language of instruction in Kenya.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Study Area

The location of the study was Kakamega County in Western Kenya.

Kakamega County has a population of 1,867,579 making it the third most populous County in Kenya, after Nairobi and Kiambu Counties [13]. Kakamega County has 13 sub-counties, among which are Navakholo and Kakamega Central Sub-Counties. Sub-Counties (formerly called districts) are the administrative regions of the Counties, under which administrative functions such as education fall.

Kakamega County has a good mix of urban and rural learning institutions giving a variety of potential languages used as a medium of instruction. The inhabitants of this region speak variants of Luhya as their mother tongue. Residents of urban areas are likely to speak Kiswahili and English, or a mixture of both.

Based on the general population size, the number of learners in primary school and the mix of urban and rural set-ups in Kakamega County, the region qualified as a suitable study area whose results could statistically be representative of the rest of Kenya.

### 4.2. Participants

The key subjects in this study were lower primary school teachers from selected schools within Kakamega Central Sub-County and Navakholo Sub-County. These schools were purposively selected from the 13 sub-counties in the County to fit the required typology of urban, rural and semi-urban schools.

Overall, the population comprised 175 primary schools which had 741 teachers. From this population, a sample size ( $n = 75$ ) was drawn, which is equal to the 10% population ( $N = 741$ ). Guided by previous studies, the researcher established that 10% of a study population is adequate for a sample [14].

Of these 75 teachers, 11 were teachers in urban schools, 35 were teachers in rural schools and 29 were in semi-urban schools. This stratified multistage sampling method was adopted to ensure the composition of the sample was representative of the population”.

### 4.3. Data Collection Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire that featured 10 Likert-type questions which were used to evaluate the teachers’ awareness of the language policy and their attitude towards it. Each item of the questionnaire was structured in five possible options ranging from “strongly agree”, “agree”, “not sure”, “disagree”, and “strongly disagree”. Each of the five responses was assigned a numerical value which was then used to measure the attitude.

The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms. Google Forms is a survey administration software included as part of the free, web-based Google Docs Editors suite offered by Google. It is convenient as it can be administered online, in confidence and with an instantaneous receipt upon completion. The Google form was prepared online and disseminated through email or messaging software directly to the teachers. The teachers then responded and submitted the completed form electronically through the ‘submit’ feature embedded in Google Forms. The researcher was able to access and track in real-time the completed forms. All forms submitted in this manner were confidential since Google does not retain any identifying information.

The results were transferred to Excel and manipulated to obtain meaningful data for analysis. These analysed results were subsequently used to draw conclusions and attain the research objective.

## 5. Results

The main aim of the study was to explore lower primary school teachers’ attitudes towards the adoption of the language of instruction policy as prescribed for the educational sector in Kenya. The main instrument used for data collection was an attitude questionnaire. The internal consistency of the questionnaire items was estimated through Cronbach’s Alpha calculated on data from a pilot study of 10 lower primary school teachers within the study area.

The internal reliability is shown in Table 1.

*Table 1. Reliability Statistics.*

Cronbach’s Alpha	Items
.782	10

The reliability for the 10 items of the questionnaire was .782. This index is higher than .70 which is considered adequate for this kind of study.

Upon satisfying the reliability test, the questionnaire was administered to the participants who comprised 75 teachers of lower primary schools in urban, rural and semi-urban schools in Kakamega County in Western Kenya. 74 teachers responded.

From the responses, descriptive statistics were computed for responses. Table 2 reports the teachers' attitude towards the policy of language of instruction as well as the computed descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics were analysed using the inbuilt function in IBM SPSS for Statistics version 26. The means and standard deviations were used for analysis. All 74 responses were analysed. For ease of interpretation, the data from the 5 Likert-type items were condensed from 5 categories into three categories as in Table 2. By doing this, the data can be observed in terms of a general agreement or general disagreement with the statements in the

questionnaires.

The highest positive item from the respondents was item Q9 [ $M = 3.891$ ,  $SD = 1.105$ ], which examined their perception of the statement "Teaching aids, books and instructional materials in Mother Tongue language are not readily available so it is difficult to teach in Mother Tongue."

On the other hand, the lowest mean rank was on item Q5 which sought the teachers' opinion on "Learners in Grade 1 to Grade 3 grasp concepts better if they are taught in their mother tongue" [ $M = 2.337$ ,  $SD = 0.983$ ].

*Table 2. Attitudes of Teachers toward the Language Policy and Descriptive Statistics.*

Item	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N	Mean	SD
Teachers in this school are well aware of the government law, policy or regulation on the language of instruction for learners in Grade 1 to 3	83.8%	5.4%	10.8%	74	3.959	0.766
Teachers should be free to choose the language they wish to best communicate classroom concepts for learners between Grade 1 and 3	82.4%	6.8%	10.8%	74	3.851	0.788
Learners in Grade 1 to Grade 3 grasp concepts better if they are taught in English	66.2%	21.6%	12.2%	74	3.635	1.041
Learners in Grade 1 to Grade 3 grasp concepts better if they are taught in Kiswahili	70.3%	20.3%	9.5%	74	3.716	0.972
Learners in Grade 1 to Grade 3 grasp concepts better if they are taught in their mother tongue	12.2%	21.6%	66.2%	74	2.337	0.983
The use of other languages, other than English, by learners in classroom interaction negatively affects their scores in English in Grade 4	63.5%	20.3%	16.2%	74	3.648	1.115
The use of other languages, other than English, by learners in classroom interaction negatively affects their scores in Mathematics in Grade 4.	36.5%	20.3%	43.2%	74	2.959	1.243
The use of other languages, other than English, by learners in classroom interaction negatively affects their scores in other subjects in Grade 4.	58.1%	16.2%	25.7%	74	3.540	1.100
Teaching aids, books and instructional materials in Mother Tongue language are not readily available so it is difficult to teach in Mother Tongue.	79.7%	5.4%	14.9%	74	3.891	1.105
There is no significant problem in using any language to teach the learners, as long as they grasp the concept.	45.9%	10.8%	43.2%	74	3.000	1.249

## 6. Discussion

With regards to awareness of government policy and regulation, 83.8% of the respondents generally agreed that teachers in their schools are aware of existing policy and regulations on the language of instruction. This is the majority of respondents and only 10.8% generally disagreed with this statement.

Likewise, the majority of teachers were in agreement that they ought to be free to select the language of instruction they should use. Perhaps, this is an indicator of the gap between policy and practice, which in turn is influenced by attitude. Whereas government policy gives a prescription of language to be used, the teachers feel they need to adopt and adapt based on their classroom experiences. There are evident challenges in implementing the language of instruction in multilingual settings. These challenges are similar to those found in previous studies on the implementation of language policy [15].

The next three bands of questions sought to know which languages the teachers find effective to use. The questions were set up in such a way as to avoid acquiescence bias. An interesting observation is that 66.2% generally agree that English is a more effective language of instruction and 70.3% generally agree that Kiswahili is a more effective language of instruction. Notably, only 12.2% of the respondents acknowledged that Mother Tongue is an effective language of instruction for learners in Grade 1 to 3. The use of English as a

language of instruction in African classrooms at the expense of indigenous languages has been debated for decades. Some researchers contend that instruction in African languages is just as effective as instruction in any of the foreign languages that remain as a result of Africa's colonial history [16]. Other researchers contend that this is not the case, and English has retained its position as a 'global language', and learners would benefit by being instructed in English, regardless of their native language.

The next three bands of questions asked the respondents to give their views on the effect of learners' use of other languages on academic performance. While it was not specified the context of "use", it is implicit that the question is asking about the languages used in daily general conversations and formal learning interactions in the classroom.

In the case of English, 63.5% of the respondents leaned towards agreement. Another 20.3% were neutral while 16.2% of the respondents generally disagreed. A reasonable number of teachers agree that the use of other languages by the learners negatively impacts learners' academic achievement in English. This finding is in agreement with previous studies on the effect of mother tongue on learners' performance in English [17]. In general, it has been observed that there is a significant difference in general academic performance among learners who had initial instruction in their mother tongue and eventual learning of other subjects in English.

This finding on the use of other languages is also a pointer to code-switching, which has been a hotly debated area in

language use Language use among multilingual speakers is often accompanied by code-switching, which in turn has an effect on how learners interact with the formal language of instruction [18].

For the case of Mathematics, 36.5% agreed that the use of other languages has a negative impact on learners' performance. Some respondents (20.3%) were neutral and 43.2% of the respondents generally disagreed. It is difficult to assess the significance of these percentages without statistical analysis. However, this data is a pointer to the fact that the majority of the teachers generally do not think the language of instruction has an impact on learner achievement in Mathematics. This may be due to the perception that little to no language skills are required in attaining numeracy competence. However, past studies have strongly leaned towards the notion that the learners' first language is a resource that can be exploited for communication, specifically in mathematics [19].

For the case of other subjects, the data shows that teachers generally agree (58.1%) that learners' academic achievement is affected by the use of other languages, other than English. Only 16.2% are neutral while the remaining 25.7% generally disagree.

A teacher's delivery of content is enhanced by the tools available for pedagogy. In this case, the teachers were asked to give their opinion on the statement that teaching aids, books and instructional materials in Mother Tongue language are not readily available so it is difficult to teach in Mother Tongue. A majority (79.7%) agreed with this statement.

The last question sought the teachers' general attitude towards the use of other languages of instruction. The responses are fairly balanced with 45.9% generally agreeing that there is no significant problem in using any language to teach the learners, as long as they grasp the concept and 43.2% expressing disagreement. Some 10.8% were neutral to this statement.

## 7. Conclusion

This study investigated a group of lower primary school teachers in urban, rural and semi-urban schools in Kakamega County in Kenya to assess their attitude towards the prescribed educational language policy. The results revealed that a majority of the teachers are aware of the government policy on language of instruction. Lower primary school teachers agree that teachers should be free to use the language they deem best for instruction in the classroom.

Whereas the language policy in Kenya adopts a multilingual approach, where Mother Tongue is one of the languages prescribed alongside English and Kiswahili, teachers are not positively receptive to its adoption. Teachers are specifically not receptive to the adoption of Mother Tongue for classroom instruction, even in areas where they are expected to use it in rural schools. The reason for this hesitation in adoption could be the teachers' discretion for pedagogical efficiency. There is also the matter of variants of the mother tongue. Due to Kenya's linguistic landscape, there is often little homogeneity of the languages spoken in the

surrounding areas of the schools in Kakamega County. There are several different variants of the mother tongue in the catchment area of a school. It would be difficult to define the language of the catchment area in such instances. It can be deduced that variants of the mother tongue in the catchment area have a bearing on the language teachers choose to use for instruction.

The study also revealed that the teachers believe that the use of varying languages of instruction impedes learners' performance, especially in subjects that are presented in English. This is compounded by the fact that at Grade 4, all learners transit to the use of the English language as the language of instruction and examination. At Grade 4, they are all expected to undertake a standardized assessment conducted in English, regardless of the language of instruction they used in Grades 1 to 3 in lower primary. The current framework leads to a differential application of the policy, which in turn affects learner outcomes at Grade 4, where all learners switch to English.

The findings indicate the need for policymakers to review the existing language of education policy especially concerning the use of Mother Tongue. If the policy is to be maintained, then learning materials and teaching aids in Mother Tongue should be availed to rural schools.

This study was carried out in the early stages of Kenya's newly implemented Competency-Based Curriculum, which introduces a nationwide assessment at Grade 4 [20]. Previously, this assessment was administered at the end of Grade 8. As such, the research design was limited to one academic year. A longitudinal study is recommended for interested researchers to evaluate differences in learner outcomes over three years for learners instructed through different languages of instruction in Grade 1 to 3.

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