

Investigation of Pupils' English Language Abilities in Tanzania: The Case of English Medium Primary Schools

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Abstract

This article is based on the study which sought to assess pupils' abilities in written English language skills among English medium primary school pupils in Tanzania. The objectives of the study were to examine pupils' abilities in constructing complete and meaningful sentences; to investigate pupils' abilities in using tenses; to assess pupils' abilities in using punctuation marks; and to examine pupils' abilities in spelling words. The respondents were 240 pupils from four English medium primary schools, based in Mbeya and Dar es Salaam Cities. The data collection process was done using an achievement test and the collected data were subjected to item analysis in which frequencies and percentages of students exhibiting the specified abilities were computed. The findings indicated that the majority of the pupils had serious problems in the tested English language abilities. It was recommended, among others, that English medium primary schools should recruit teachers who are proficient in English language so that they could serve as role models to the pupils.

Keywords: *investigation; English language abilities; English medium primary schools; Tanzania*

1. Introduction

The language policy in Tanzania provides for the use of English in pre-schools and primary schools (URT, 1995; URT, 1997). Before the 1995 Education Amendment Act, the provision of primary school education was monopolized by the government, and for all seven years of primary education, children were to be instructed solely in Kiswahili, which is the national language (Komba, 2012). However, some few government schools, including Olympio and Arusha, and other private schools were spared for instruction in English because they had to serve particular requirements, mostly religious and diplomatic (Rugemalira, 2005). Following the Education and Training Policy of 1995, the language policy in Tanzania officially allowed the use of English in pre-school and primary schools (URT, 1995; URT, 1997). The liberalization of education in Tanzania opened doors for the mushrooming of English medium primary schools and it was cemented by the 1995 Education and Training Policy that authorized private establishment, ownership and management of primary schools (URT, 1995).

Whereas English is the medium of instruction in most private English medium primary schools, it is also a compulsory subject in the state-run Kiswahili medium primary schools. In English medium primary schools, English is used in classroom instructions for all subjects (excluding Kiswahili language) and in all other communications out of classroom with teachers and non teachers. The aim is to create a kind of English speech community at school where pupils are immersed in English to enable them to see how English is used in actual communication.

Comparatively, English medium primary schools are far more expensive than the state owned primary schools. However, most parents would like their children to register in English medium primary schools. The expenses associated with these schools, in turn act as a screening mechanism such that only the most affluent families manage to have their kids in these schools. The massive aspiration for English medium primary schools raises a question as to why many would like to educate their children in these schools. Rugemalira (2005) puts it clear that, in addition to the parents' desire to see their children speak good English for socio-economic and political reasons, there is a clear

indication that government primary schools are to blame for having unfavourable conditions in terms of school infrastructure, staffing, teaching and learning resources, unmotivated teachers and general learning environment. He statistically contends that comparatively English medium primary schools are far better off than government owned primary schools in relation to general human and physical infrastructure.

By having their children in the well furnished English primary schools, parents believe that, in addition to better input, their children will also have a good command of English that will make them fare well in academic and socio-economic spheres (Rugemalira 2005). For example, Rubagumya (2003) and Muhdhar (2002) revealed that 79.8% and 81% of parents respectively would not send their children to private primary schools if English was not the medium of instruction. However, there were inadequate studies which had been conducted to find out whether or not pupils who graduate from the English medium primary schools seem to have mastered the English language to the expected levels that would make them functional in English in real life situations as per the parents' expectations. In view of this, the general objective of this study was to assess the level of competence in written English language skills among English medium primary school pupils in Tanzania. Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following objectives: First, to examine pupils' abilities to construct complete and meaningful sentences, and secondly, to investigate pupils' abilities to use tenses. The third specific objective of this study was to assess pupils' abilities to use punctuation marks, while the last objective sought to examine pupils' abilities to spell words. The study was also guided by four research questions which were:

- i. To what extent can pupils construct complete and meaningful sentences?
- ii. To what extent can pupils use English language tenses appropriately in written texts?
- iii. To what extent can pupils use punctuation marks appropriately?
- iv. To what extent can pupils spell words correctly?

2. Literature Review

Language Policy has to do with decisions (rules, regulations, guidelines) about the status, use, domains and territories of language and the rights of speakers of the languages in question (Spolsky, 2004). Language policy is an indicator that a society has a variety of languages which must be managed in such a way that different communicative demands are consistently satisfied. In education, language policy should specify how different languages can be used to educate the nation as media of instructions (URT, 1997). Language policy also guides individuals on the choice of language for appropriate social use. In a multilingual society like Tanzania, language policy is inevitable as the country has over 127 languages spoken in the country (Gordon, 2005). Accordingly, Kiswahili is spoken as a second language by a vast majority of the population and it is a straightforward choice for a national language.

A common educational dilemma in multilingual African countries is what to choose as the language of instruction. This is because in the absence of an ethnically neutral lingua franca, any choice will be seen to favor certain ethno-linguistic groups at the expense of all others. According to Alidou (2004), this was not a problem prior to colonization, when each community used its own language to educate its children. This is to say that education across ethno-linguistic groups was not necessary until the arrival of colonialism and Western education, when formal schools were introduced and children who spoke different languages were often placed in the same classroom. The problem of multilingualism in the classroom had a simple solution for most colonizers: that is, to teach in the colonial language. However, in Tanzania, the choice of a colonial language was less obvious since Kiswahili was already widely spoken by the time of the arrival of the colonizers. Language policy and practices in Tanzania is characterized by historical periods through which the country has gone.

Historically, Kiswahili had its first official status during the German colonial rule as it was designated for nationwide use in education and colonial administration. According to Roy-Campbell (2001), the choice of Kiswahili (at the expense of German or any other indigenous language) was intended to prepare Tanzanians for employment in the colonial bureaucracy, using the convenient lingua franca already spoken by nearly all potential employees both in schools and in colonial administration was most practical. This promotion of Swahili as a language of education and administration during German colonial rule was instrumental in the language's spread as a lingua franca in Tanzania (Roy-Campbell 2001). When the British government took over the administration of German East Africa following World War I, Kiswahili was preserved as the language of instruction in the first five years of primary school, but the medium in the last three years of primary and all of secondary school was switched to English (Rubagumya 1990). The colonial administration was also carried out in English. Roy-Campbell (2001) argues that the British

administration had a concrete plan to train a small minority of elite Tanzanians to assist in colonial administration, while for the rest of the population the aim was to maintain very low levels of education.

On independence, Tanzania inherited the colonial language policy whereby English and Kiswahili co-existed as media of instructions at the level of primary schools (URT 1995). Following the Arusha declaration of 1967 which resulted in the philosophy of socialism and self reliance, education was expected to reflect the Tanzanian life, and the use of Kiswahili as a medium of instruction was the practical realization of the move. Kiswahili was thus the medium of instruction in all seven years of primary schooling. Further to that, during the 1970s policy makers attempted to switch from English to Swahili in secondary schools (Mlama & Matteredu 1978; Lwaitama & Rugemalira 1990).

In February 1982, the Presidential Commission on Education, appointed by the then President of the United Republic of Tanzania, Mwalimu Nyerere, recommended that a change from English to Swahili in secondary classrooms be effected starting in 1985 (Lwaitama & Rugemalira 1990). However, in 1984, the Ministry of Education released an official, insisting that both languages, English and Kiswahili, would be used as media of instruction and that English would be improved at all levels of education” (Lwaitama & Rugemalira 1990: 37). Furthermore, Mwalimu Nyerere announced in a speech in 1984 that English was needed in secondary schools in order to encourage Tanzanians to learn and value the language (Lwaitama & Rugemalira 1990). So from these facts, it was clear that English was not to be the medium of instruction at the level of primary school. English was to be taught as compulsory subject in the primary education and as a medium of instruction at post primary education.

Although English medium primary schools are a relatively development in the Tanzanian education industry, the linguistic dilemma that has characterised the industry after independence has attracted a number of studies. It should be understood beforehand that, English medium primary schools in Tanzania have emerged despite the heated debate on the use of English in secondary schools (Mlama & Matteredu, 1978; Rugemalira 1990; Rubagumya 1993; Roy-Campbell & Qorro 1997). Consequently, there is quite impressive literature on language practices in education in Tanzania, mostly dominated by debates on the choice of language of instructions between English and Kiswahili at all levels of education. The debates are an indication that language practices in Tanzania education system need to be investigated, and this study was part of that attempt.

Most studies that have specifically paid attention to English medium primary schools in Tanzania have come up with varied results (Bakawhemama, 2010; Bakawhemama, 2009; Pangani, 2008; Rugemalira, 2005; Rubagumya, 2003; Muhdhar, 2002). For example, Bakawhemama (2009a; 2010) conducted two different studies to compare pupils' performance in English and Kiswahili medium primary schools. The aim was to examine how pupils in Kiswahili and English media schools compared and the reason behind differentials in performance between the two media primary schools. The findings indicated that children in English medium primary schools did better than their counterparts in the Kiswahili medium primary schools. Accounting for the differentials, the author noted that the differences in the performance were not attributed to the medium of instruction alone. Rather, the difference in performance was related to, among other variables, instructional activities, schools facilities and general teaching and learning environments. The findings recur in several other studies (Babaci-Wilhite, 2009a, 2010b; Vuzo 2010; Brock-Utne 2009).

Another study was conducted by Pangani (2008) to find out the contribution of instruction in English to the development of competence in English. The findings indicated that there was relatively little contribution of English medium schools in terms of academic English development. However, her study included pupils at very low levels of primary education who were in the process of developing language skills. In the current study, pupils were tested for their written English language competences after their seven years of instruction in English. This timing was considered to be appropriate since the evaluation could reflect what had been taking place for the whole period. In addition, Rugemalira's (2005) study, which sought to establish the challenges of English medium primary schools in Tanzania, found that English was not what made pupils in English primary schools to perform better than those in Kiswahili medium schools. Instead, the researcher noted that such factors as physical and human resources as well as children's socio-economic status were behind their better performance. Whereas Rugemalira's study focused on instructional and infrastructural factors, Rubagumya's (2003) study sought to examine what really happened in the classroom in terms of imparting knowledge using English. In this study, the findings indicated that parents did not care about the kind of knowledge that pupils developed, provided the knowledge was in English. Rubagumya's findings agreed with those of Muhdhar (2002) who found out that 79.1% of the parents would take their children away if English was not the medium of instruction.

It seemed that most of these studies had focused on either the general academic performance or making comparison

in terms of academic performance between English and Kiswahili media primary schools. In other words, the studies had little to offer in terms of revealing the actual pupils' competences in various English language skills, hence the rationale for the current study.

2. Methods

This study employed a quantitative research approach in which a case study research design was adopted. The study was conducted in Dar es Salaam and Mbeya cities, involving 240 standard seven pupils, randomly selected from two English medium primary schools in each of the two cities. The main instrument of data collection was an achievement test which was administered to the selected pupils. The achievement test comprised 20 multiple choice items which sought to measure pupils' abilities in written English language as specified in the objectives of the study. The validity of the test was considered by following a six step procedure in developing a test as proposed by Gall, *et al.*, (1996). In this regard, first, a careful thought was made about specific constructs the test would measure. After this important consideration, the target population, which would sit for the achievement test, was defined. This was followed by a review of other tests and examinations that measure specified constructs to broaden the researchers' understanding on issues of validity and reliability of achievement tests. Then, a preliminary version of the test was developed before the same was revised to obtain the final version, after seeking opinions from experts in test construction. For the purpose of ensuring reliability of the test, a test-retest method was used. This is a measure of the consistency of a test or assessment across time (Nunnally, 1978). The final version of the achievement test was administered twice to a sample of 78 pupils with the interval of two months between the first and the second test. After marking the two tests, the scores were correlated using the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and gave the coefficient of $r=0.81$. Any coefficient above 0.7 between the two test scores is acceptable as a quantitative measure of the test-retest reliability (Gall *et al.*, 1996). After marking the pupils' scripts, the collected data were subjected to item analysis in which frequencies and percentages of students exhibiting the specified abilities were computed.

3. Results

As stated in the methodology section, the data required to address the specified objectives of this study were collected using an achievement test. The analysis of students' responses could be summarized as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Item Analysis Results

S/N	Items	Difficulty Index	Difficulty Index (%)	Average Difficulty Index for each 5 items
1	Ability to construct complete and meaningful sentences	0.425	42.5	
2	Ability to construct complete and meaningful sentences	0.367	36.7	
3	Ability to construct complete and meaningful sentences	0.329	32.9	
4	Ability to construct complete and meaningful sentences	0.421	42.1	
5	Ability to construct complete and meaningful sentences	0.483	48.3	0.41
6	Ability to use tenses correctly	0.225	22.5	
7	Ability to use tenses correctly	0.254	25.4	
8	Ability to use tenses correctly	0.192	19.2	0.23
9	Ability to use tenses correctly	0.246	24.6	
10	Ability to use tenses correctly	0.213	21.3	
11	Ability to use correct punctuation	0.250	25.0	
12	Ability to use correct punctuation	0.204	20.4	
13	Ability to use correct punctuation	0.317	31.7	0.27
14	Ability to use correct punctuation	0.288	28.8	
15	Ability to use correct punctuation	0.267	26.7	
16	Ability to spell words correctly	0.333	33.3	
17	Ability to spell words correctly	0.163	16.3	
18	Ability to spell words correctly	0.142	14.2	0.23
19	Ability to spell words correctly	0.363	36.3	
20	Ability to spell words correctly	0.129	12.9	

The first objective of this study was to examine pupils' abilities to construct complete and meaningful sentences. A total of five items were included in the test to measure pupils' abilities to construct complete and meaningful sentences. The average difficulty index for the five items was 0.41. The computed difficulty index means that 41% of the respondents were able to construct complete and meaningful sentences. On the other hand, it also means that 59% of the respondents were unable to construct complete and meaningful sentences.

Specifically, in item 1, the difficulty index was 0.425 which means that 42.5% of the respondents could construct complete and meaningful sentences while a significant proportion of the respondents (57.5%) were not able to construct complete and meaningful sentences. In item 2, which was also about the respondents' abilities to construct complete and meaningful sentences, the difficulty index was 0.367 which means that 36.7% of the respondents were able to construct complete and meaningful sentences. On the other hand, it also means that quite a large proportion of respondents (63.3%) could not construct complete and meaningful sentences. Item 3 was also meant to measure the respondents' abilities to construct complete and meaningful sentences. The difficulty index for this item was 0.329 which implies that 32.9% of the respondents were able to construct complete and meaningful sentences. On the other hand, it also means that the majority of the respondents (67.1%) were unable to construct complete and meaningful sentences. As for item 4, the respondents were also tested their abilities to construct complete and meaningful sentences. The difficulty index for the item was 0.421 which means that 42.1% of the respondents were able to construct complete and meaningful sentences while 57% of the respondents were unable. With regard to item 5, which was also on the respondents' abilities to construct complete and meaningful sentences, the difficulty index was 0.483, implying that 48.3% of the respondents could construct complete and meaningful sentences. This also means that 51.7% of the respondents were not able to construct complete and meaningful sentences.

The second objective of this study was to examine pupils' abilities to use tenses. To achieve this objective, pupils were given tasks that could lead them to discover the appropriate tenses that could be used to express various events and actions. The pupils were specifically tested on their abilities to use past tense, present tense and future aspect. A total of five items were presented to the respondents to test their abilities to use tenses. As shown in Table 1, the average difficulty index for the five items which measured the respondents' abilities to use tenses was 0.23. This means that only 23% of the respondents were able to use correct tenses while more than three-quarters (77%) of the respondents were unable to use tenses correctly. It seemed that the pupils' ability to use tenses was even lower than their abilities to construct complete and meaningful sentences. For instance, in item 6, the difficulty index for the correct option was 0.225, which means that only 22.5% of the respondents were able to use the specified tense appropriately. On the other hand, it also means that 77.5% of respondents could not use the specified tense correctly. Item 7 tested pupils' abilities to use simple present tense. The difficulty index for this item was 0.254, which means that 25.4% of the respondents were able to use simple present tense appropriately while 74.6% of the respondents could not. Moreover, item 8 tested pupils' abilities to use past tense. In this item, the item analysis gave the difficulty index of 0.192. This means that 19.2% of the respondents were able to use the specified tense while more than 80% of the respondents could not use the past tense. An interesting observation was that the respondents could not distinguish between the simple past tense and the present perfect simple as a good number of respondents (37.1%) chose the present perfect simple aspect instead of the simple past tense. Item 9 measured the pupils' abilities to use the present continuous aspect. The difficulty index for this item was 0.246 which means that 24.6% of the respondents could use the present continuous tense. It also means that 75.4% of the respondents were unable to use the present continuous aspect. In addition, item 10 of the achievement test measured the pupils' abilities to use the future aspect. The difficulty index for this item was 0.213 which means that 21.3% of the respondents were able to use the future aspect while 78.7% of the respondents were unable. It is worth noting that in this item, more candidates (23.3%) chose the present simple tense option, although in addition to being incorrect, the option was also limited by subject-verb agreement. The other significant proportion of respondents, representing 20.4%, chose the past simple option instead, although the temporal adverbial signalled the future. It seemed that the majority of the respondents had weaknesses in using adverbial cues as a guide to identifying the correct tense.

In the third objective of this study, pupils' abilities to use correct punctuation were examined. The average difficulty index for the five items as shown in Table 1 was 0.27. The computed difficulty index means that only 27% of the respondents were able to use punctuation marks. On the other hand, it also means that 73% of the respondents could not use punctuation marks correctly. Generally, the findings indicated that pupils' abilities to use correct punctuation marks was still low (below 50%) in all the tested items on punctuation marks. For instance, item 11, which tested pupils' abilities to use an exclamation mark (!), the difficulty index for the correct option was 0.250, which means that only 25% of the respondents were able to use an exclamation mark. On the other hand, it also means that 75% of the respondents could not use the exclamation mark. In item 12, the respondents were tested their abilities to use a

question mark (?) as one of the punctuation marks. The item analysis gave the difficulty index of 0.204 which means that 20.4% of pupils were able to use the specified punctuation mark while 79.6% of the respondents were unable. In item 13, the respondents were tested their abilities to use commas to separate items in a list. In this item, the resulting difficult index was 0.317. It means that only 31.7% of the respondents were able to use commas to separate items in a list while the other 68.3% of the respondents could not use this punctuation mark. Item 14 measured the respondents' abilities to use a full stop (.) In this item, the resulting difficulty index was 0.288 which means that 28.8% of the respondents were able to use the full stop whereas 71.2% of the respondents were unable. An interesting observation was that 20.4% of the respondents chose the comma option instead of a full stop, implying that they were confusing between the two punctuation marks. In item 15, the respondents were tested on their abilities to use capital letters, especially when writing personal and place names. The difficulty index for this item was 0.267 which implied that 26.7% of the respondents were able to use capital letters with personal and place names. The same difficulty index also means that the rest of the respondents (73.3%) were unable to use capital letters when writing personal and place names.

The last objective of this study sought to examine pupils' abilities to spell words. Like in other objectives, five items were included in the achievement test to measure this ability. The item analysis results for the five items as shown in Table 4.1 gave the average difficulty index of 0.23 which means that 23% of the respondents were able to spell words correctly while 77% of the respondents could not spell words correctly. Specifically, in item 16 pupils' were tested their abilities to spell the word *tomorrow*. The difficulty index for this item was 0.333 which means that only 33.3% of the respondents were able to spell the specified word correctly while the rest of the respondents (66.7%) could not. As for item 17, which also measured pupils' abilities to spell words, pupils were asked to spell the word *pineapple*. The computed difficulty index for this item was 0.163 which implies that 16.3% of the respondents were able to spell the word correctly while the majority of the respondents (83.7%) could not spell the specified word correctly. In item 18, pupils' were examined their abilities to spell the word *beautiful*. The difficulty index for this item was 0.142 which means that 14.2% of the respondents were able to spell the word correctly. Likewise, the computed difficulty index also means that most of the respondents (85.8%) were not able to spell the word correctly. In item 19, pupils were asked to spell the word *vegetables*. The difficulty index for this item was 0.363 which implies that 36.3% of the respondents could spell the specified word correctly while the majority of the respondents (63.7%) could not spell the word correctly. In item 20, the respondents were required to spell the word *examinations*. The resulting difficulty index for this item was 0.129 which means that only 12.9% of the respondents were able to spell the word correctly and quite a significant proportion of the candidates (87.1%) were not able to spell the specified word correctly.

On the basis of the item analysis results, it could be concluded that most of the pupils performed poorly in all the four tested abilities. This is evident because the level of difficulty index was between 0.23 and 0.41, which implies that more than 50% of the pupils lacked the tested abilities. Specifically, it seemed that the pupils had significant problems in the construction of complete and meaningful sentences (79.2%), correct use of tenses (54.6%), correct use of punctuation marks (73.7%) and correct spelling (75.4%).

4. Discussion

In this study, it was envisaged that after the seven years of learning English language as well as using the same as the medium of instruction, the English medium primary school pupils would be able to perform better in the specified abilities. However, the findings of this study revealed that the majority of pupils could not perform well in the tested abilities. The findings that pupils' level of proficiency in English language was low concur with the findings of other studies conducted in Tanzania and elsewhere. For instance, Uwezo (2011) reports that pupils in primary schools in Tanzania experienced difficulties in English language skills, particularly reading. In this regard, the findings indicated that 50% of standard seven pupils could not read the English story books meant for standard two. This implies that the English language proficiency levels of the pupils were extremely low. The study by Uwezo targeted primary school pupils' in their final year of primary education, as was the case in the current study. However, the study by Uwezo focused on public primary schools, which are mainly Kiswahili medium schools whereas this study focused solely on English medium primary schools. The similarity in the findings between the two studies virtually implies that the medium of instruction (English or Kiswahili) may have little to do with pupils' proficiency in English. Other factors have been found to have a significant influence on language proficiency (Rugemalira, 2005; Baker, 2001; Krashen, 1997). For example, while Rugemalira (2005) and Baker (2001) attribute successful language proficiency to sociolinguistic and socio-economic variables, Krashen (1997) associate the success in language skills

with the nature of linguistic input and pedagogy.

Moreover, Vuzo's (2002) study reports low levels of proficiency in English language, particularly with regard to secondary school students in Tanzania. The study focused on writing skills and the findings indicated that the majority of the students lacked writing skills. The same findings of low levels of English language skills among school pupils have also been revealed by Said (2003) whose study was done in Zanzibar.

It seems that the problem of low levels of English proficiency is not confined to primary and secondary school students only. The problem is also evident at the university level. For example, Komba (2012) conducted a study on the predictive validity of the university communication skills examination on students' overall academic performance at Sokoine University of Agriculture, in Tanzania. The skills tested, which are relevant to the present study, included abilities in using punctuation marks, tenses and correct spelling. The findings indicated that students had low abilities in the tested skills. Therefore, it seemed that the low levels of English language abilities observed at the lower levels of education are carried over to the university.

The observed weaknesses in English language skills among primary school pupils in English medium primary schools could be linked to poor English language teaching in the schools. Allen (2008) notes that the poor English language teaching was evident as he found that the majority of primary school teachers in Tanzania had an insufficient command of English to be able to teach effectively. In the same light, Dyegula (2009) conducted a study in Dar es Salaam to assess the teaching and learning of language subjects in primary schools. The findings indicated that the majority of English language teachers were not conversant in the teaching of the subject. Therefore, the fact that pupils in English medium primary exhibited weaknesses in English language skills is not a surprising phenomenon. This is due to the reason that most of the schools recruit teachers from the same pool of English language teachers in Tanzania whose background in English language is definitely poor.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Most parents, especially the economically well-off, have been taking their children to English medium primary schools with the expectations that the children would be able to master English language and become more competitive in the labour market. The findings of this study revealed that most of the pupils in English medium primary schools had serious problems in the tested language abilities. This means that the parents' desires and expectations were not being realized. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: first, parents should be careful when they plan to enroll their children in English medium primary schools. This is because some of these schools do not have requisites for the realization of the expectations of both parents and pupils. Secondly, the English medium primary schools should recruit teachers who are proficient in English language so that they can serve as role models to the pupils. This should be done to not only English language teachers but also teachers who teach other subjects within the schools.

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