



The Interplay between Students' First/home Languages and School Culture on Students' Learning of English in Tanzania

Dr Upendo P. Biswalo

St John's University of Tanzania

upendopsix@yahoo.co.uk; ubiswalo@sjut.ac.tz

Abstract: Tanzania is a multilingual society with more than 120 spoken indigenous languages plus Kiswahili, which is the country's national language. In Tanzania, while Kiswahili is the medium of instruction (the MOI) at the primary education level; English is the MOI at secondary education level. Although English is taught at the primary level, it appears that students do not learn enough to be able to use the language in secondary education for communication and learning purposes. This study explores English language teaching in the three secondary schools in Tanzania. Data were collected through interviews with teachers and classroom observations. The findings have revealed that students' first languages and cultures were seen as obstacles in learning English, and were prohibited on the school premises. This implies that students were disconnected from their cultures in order to fit in the school culture. Also, teachers believed that students' low proficiency in English was due to their educational background of using Kiswahili at primary education level. Studies suggest that students' first languages and cultures are important in learning a second language, and therefore, this study recommends that students' first languages and cultures should be regarded as resources and not as obstacles in learning English.

Keywords: English language teaching, Kiswahili, Home languages, School culture, Tanzania

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1. Introduction

Today, English has gained the status of a global language (Baker, 2011). It has spread globally due to its power in economic, cultural, educational, science and technology, political and other domains (Baker, 2011, 2012; East, 2008). English now represents diverse cultures and linguistic identities (Kachru, 2006). Since Tanzania is not an island, this study suggests that it is high time to equip its learners with English language to enable them interact and communicate with other speakers of English globally. Today, English language is no longer a threat to indigenous languages as May (2012) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) have suggested, rather, it strengthens communication purposes among people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds: both native and non-native speakers of

English from different parts of the world (Biswalo, 2015). Tanzania is a multilingual and multicultural society with more than 120 spoken indigenous languages (Qorro, 2013), plus Kiswahili, which is the country's national language. This study suggests that, the teaching and learning of English in Tanzania should aim to equip these learners who come from 120 plus tribal languages and cultures. This could mean that, in a class of forty (40) students, it is possible to find more than twenty (20) tribal groups and cultures. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, students' first language(s) will mostly be referred to Kiswahili because it is the language most students understand, and they use it both at school and at home. Kiswahili is the language used by the majority of the population, and is considered as a lingua franca of the country (Qorro, 2013). It is the language of communication in the parliament, lower courts of law, and most government businesses (Neke,

2005). It is also the language of the local media — TV and radio.

Studies have shown that students can learn and understand better a second language when their first languages and cultures are given a priority (Sleeter, 2010; Brock-Utne, 2012). Since majority of students in public secondary schools in Tanzania do not understand and use English frequently, this study, among other things, suggests that it is important to maintain students' languages and cultures to allow them to learn English more successfully (May, 2005). As English is a means of communication across nations and cultures in this globalised world, using the English language centres on the negotiation of meaning, and understanding the cultural differences among those involved (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004) because today, English belongs to anyone who uses it. This study, therefore explores English language teaching from the perspective of six teachers in secondary schools in the Dodoma region. It aims to discover whether students' first languages and cultures are given a priority in the teaching and learning of English in a Tanzanian English language classroom.

2. Literature Review

In Tanzania, Kiswahili is the language of instruction in pre and primary education in public schools in Tanzania, while English is taught as a subject. As the lingua franca of the country, Kiswahili is the national language and most students use it in their everyday life communications (Qorro, 2013). English language plays a pivotal role at the secondary education level in Tanzania. English is taught as a subject at the secondary education level, and also, it is the language of instruction. Since English is not intensively taught at the primary education level, many students may finish their primary education with low proficiency in the English language. These students, on the other hand, are expected to use English as the medium of communication with teachers and their fellow students at secondary level. That means, students need to learn better and use English not only for education purposes, but also for communication purposes.

Studies conducted in Tanzania show that the shift of the language of instruction from Kiswahili to English in secondary education has brought a lot of confusion to students and acts as a barrier to learning because the language is not familiar to them (Brock-Utne 2006; Qorro, 2006; Senkoro, 2005). These students, according to Qorro (2013), “face serious difficulties using English knowledge in all subjects taught in English during the four years of secondary education” (p. 31). Qorro argues that English is spoken by a small population of Tanzanians, while the majority use Kiswahili. Thus, because English is not the home language for the majority of students, many find it hard to learn and use because the language does not link directly to their

everyday life experiences. It could be argued that the education system in Tanzania inhibits students speaking their home or national languages by having them “speak English only” (Qorro, 2013, p. 40). Brock-Utne's (2012) study emphasises the importance of students' first languages in learning at school. Brock-Utne says that children learn better when they understand what the teacher is saying.

This study suggests that teachers need to learn about their students' home lives, cultures and languages. Student's home lives play a crucial role in learning at school, and therefore, students' cultural knowledge, perspectives and skills should act as a resource for teaching and learning. Because what students already know enables them to explore and learn unfamiliar knowledge and experiences. Research show that the relationships between school and home are a significant factor in student achievement (Sleeter, 2010). But when school does not value students' home cultures and languages, there will be a disconnection, and students may feel the school is not a good place to be as they are not welcomed (Sleeter, 2010).

This study argues that, for students to learn English well, their first languages and cultures should be given a priority in classroom teaching, in order to allow them learn English successfully. Researchers (Holliday, 2009; Sybing, 2011) have emphasised the need for teachers to create an environment of acceptance and respect for all students. Such an environment will help students to learn from each other, and to see that their cultural values and norms are appreciated in the classroom. When students' cultures are included in learning English (Holliday, 2009; Sybing, 2011), it will allow students to critically analyse their own cultures and the cultures of other speakers of English in order to build mutual understanding. This study, therefore, suggests that the teaching of English language in Tanzania today should aim to enable both teachers and learners to become aware of other people's cultures, as well as their own, to allow them to interact and communicate effectively in both local and global contexts. Thus, including students' languages and cultures in learning English in a Tanzanian classroom should be given attention, as this study suggests.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study whereby data were gathered through classroom observations and interviews with six teachers of English who were teaching English in public secondary schools in Dodoma region. Data were collected in the three selected public secondary schools in the Dodoma city, in Dodoma-Tanzania. The reason of using qualitative design is because it enabled rich data to be gathered from participants' own words and experiences (Merriam, 1998). Merriam explains that qualitative research assumes meaning and knowledge

are constructed in a social context and enables the researcher to learn from participants' subjective perspectives. Punch (2005) noted that "the major characteristic of qualitative research is that it is naturalistic, preferring to study people, things, and events in their natural settings" (p. 141).

The study used semi-structured interviews because they are "one of the powerful ways we have of understanding others" (Punch, 2005, p. 168). The use of interviews in this study enabled the researcher to get detailed and in-depth information about English language teaching in three secondary schools in Tanzania from the participants' points of view (Creswell, 2012). All the interviews were conducted in schools. Interviews were conducted in either English department offices, in heads of schools' offices, or any vacant office available for that day. These environments were noise-free and also assisted in ensuring confidentiality. All interviews were conducted at a time convenient for teachers during non-teaching hours and when they had no other responsibilities.

During observation, the researcher positioned herself in the corner so that she could see the teacher clearly and observe what was going on in the classroom. Although the focus was on the methods and approaches teachers were using in the classroom, occasionally she was able to observe teacher/students' interaction and to observe students' behaviours and how they responded to the teacher's methods and approaches. She also observed school premises, such as classrooms and teachers' offices for study's purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

Although studies have revealed that students' first languages and cultures are a better resource for them to learn better a second language (May, 2005; Qorro, 2013), this is contrary to what has been observed in this study. Students' first languages and cultures were prohibited in school premises, believing that they hinder them in learning English better-a second language for this matter.

Most teachers in this study appeared to blame the government for its policy of using Kiswahili at primary education that causes students' failure to learn English at secondary education. They believed that students' first languages and cultures and the use of Kiswahili as barriers in learning English. They saw students' low level of English proficiency emanating from outside the classroom. Students' first languages and Kiswahili background were mentioned by all teachers as being a major problem for students in learning English. This suggests that although English is taught at the primary level, it appears that students do not learn enough to be able to use the language in secondary education for communication and learning purposes.

As highlighted in the introduction section, English is the language of instruction in secondary education in Tanzania. Students have their mother tongues (vernaculars) plus Kiswahili, the national language of the country; therefore, secondary education is often difficult for them because English is not the language of day-to-day communication. One teacher elaborated:

Sometimes, it is very difficult to interact in the classroom using the [English] language because it is not their first language. (Semi-structured interview, 2/13)

Another teacher commented that:

The main problem is the background of learners themselves because they come from different cultures.... At home also is a problem, because people at home normally don't speak English. (Semi-structured interview, 2/13)

In effect, from the statements above, teachers were proposing that students' first languages are an obstacle to their learning English. Since English is not the home language, many students found it difficult to learn and use it in schools. In this way, these teachers appeared to blame the education system. However, looking at their positioning, it clearly shows that these teachers are also relinquishing their responsibility for students' low academic achievement. The findings of this study also align with Bishop's (2005) study which found that, Māori students fail to learn because they are disconnected from their cultures and find the culture of the school difficult to fit in (Bishop, 2005). They saw the students' low proficiency in English "as being outside of their own agency, of their own abilities to engage with these problems" (Bishop, 2005, p. 78). When the cultures at home and school are different, teachers "have a ready-made excuse" (Bishop, 2005, p. 71) for students' failure in school.

Additionally, teachers believed that students' mispronunciation was caused by their mother tongues and the extensive use of Kiswahili in their daily interactions. This also produces one of the tensions for teachers of English:

We have students with different backgrounds. What we normally do in the class is just to equip them with the English language as the medium of instruction. (Semi-structured interview, 1/13)

Although the teacher was aware of the existence of different cultures in her classroom, she found it a big challenge to accommodate these when teaching. This teacher was aware that her students potentially came from more than 120 cultural groups. However, for her, students' first languages and cultures were barriers, not resources, in learning a second language, English. She commented:

In most primary schools, they use Kiswahili as the medium of instruction. So, when [students] join secondary school, they come with Kiswahili as the medium of expressing themselves. So, there, we have to impose the new language which is English, in our culture, so as to help them to cope, to understand, in order to use English in their everyday life. (Semi-structured interview, 1/2013)

The statement suggests that the teacher regarded Kiswahili as a barrier for students learning English. Although the teacher acknowledged that her class comprised of students from diverse backgrounds, knowledge about dealing with such students seemed to be missing. In other words, this teacher appeared not to draw on her students' cultural diversity as a resource.

Moreover, as explained in other places, that, English is the language of instruction in secondary education, this teacher believed that students need to know it in order to learn other secondary school subjects. This also suggests that the teaching of English is mainly focused on academic achievement, because students need to communicate in academic language in order to learn and pass examinations. This could be one of the reasons that students' languages are not welcomed in schools despite studies that indicate how important students' first languages are to learning a second language (Lisanza, 2014; Newton et al., 2010). However, looking closely at teacher's statement above, the phrase "to cope, to understand, in order to use English in their everyday life" sounds unrealistic because English is not an everyday language for the majority of Tanzanians as studies conducted in Tanzania concerning English language have revealed (Qorro, 2006, 2013; Brock-Utne, 2012).

Similarly, another teacher also believed that students' first languages and cultures, and the use of Kiswahili, were barriers for students to learn English:

It is very difficult to change a person from his/her own culture and accept other culture. In school we use English language, but once they [students] go home, they are using Kiswahili. It is very difficult to transfer from his/her culture to other culture; it is very difficult to accept [other culture]. (Semi-structured interview, 1/13)

Another teacher commented that:

The students have got their own mother tongues; and here in town [Dodoma urban], Kiswahili is the dominant language; and from primary school, they have been taught all subjects in Kiswahili. When they come to secondary school, they are supposed to be taught or to learn through English language. So, it is very difficult for them to be fluent [in

English] and to understand easily [the language]. (Semi-structured interview, 2/13)

The teachers' statements above suggest that the students' use of Kiswahili at home, for primary education, and in other social interactions had a great impact on the learning of English at secondary school. In effect, these teachers were suggesting that students need to set aside their first cultures and languages so that they can learn English. Studies suggest that students' first languages and cultures are actually important in learning a second language (Lisanza, 2014; Newton et al., 2010). Alptekin (2002) suggests that the inclusion of students' background languages and cultures enables students to reflect on, and to critically compare and contrast their own languages and cultures with the languages and cultures of other speakers of English globally, which assists them in interacting and communicating effectively. The prohibition of the use of students' first languages and cultures, then, could be understood to mean that students are disconnected from their languages and cultures, and therefore, it will be difficult for them to learn English meaningfully.

Punishment for students who speak other languages than English

This study found that students who were speaking other languages than English in the school surroundings were punished. Most teachers admitted that, students who were caught speaking languages other than English, were punished (Teacher, phone communication, 7/13). Another teacher explained:

The problem is that they have got their mother languages, but we use to enforce them to speak English. The classroom should have the environment of English, and those who are vernacular language speakers or Kiswahili speakers we normally give them punishment. (Semi-structured interview, 2/13)

Teachers' explanations above suggest that students' own languages and cultures are excluded and marginalised in the learning of English, which supports the argument above, that students' first languages and cultures are not considered as a resource for them to learn English.

Moreover, there were signs on top of staffroom offices doors and classrooms which were read "Speak English Only" The phrase "the classroom should have the environment of English" from this teacher's comment above appears to attempt to explain and justify why students were obliged to follow the school's rule of speaking English only, with those who failed to do so being punished. When English is used as an academic language, and the language of instruction, students' first

languages and cultures were seen as obstacles to their learning English, and were prohibited on the school premises.

This study corroborates with May's (2005) study on Bilingual/Immersion Education in New Zealand. May argues that the little consideration of Pasifika students' first languages and their cultures in the education system in New Zealand not only marginalises these students and their languages and cultures, but also limits them in their educational success. Students fail to connect with their first languages and cultures during learning as English is the predominant medium of communication and interaction in schools in New Zealand.

Lisanza's (2014) study in a Kenyan classroom demonstrates how teachers can use students' cultures and experiences in learning. In her study, Lisanza observed the teachers' code switched between students' first language — Kikamba or Kiswahili— when teaching them. They used familiar contexts and students' experiences. Lisanza's study supports the view that students' first languages and cultures are important to include in their learning because they allow students to make connections between home and school knowledge, and thus facilitate their learning. This means that students should be provided with relevant materials that fit with their own experiences and cultures when learning English. Saraceni (2009) suggested that English should not be taught as somebody else's language, but as an additional language to be added to one's linguistic repertoire, as an expression of one's own culture.

The argument of this study is that when students' first languages and cultures are included in the English language classroom, this will allow them to learn English meaningfully. In the same vein, this inclusion would also enable teachers to discover different interpretations of meanings students have and, thus, add to teachers' knowledge in the area of interacting across cultures. Rather than being prejudiced against and ridiculing students' cultures, such an approach could enable both learners and teachers to understand differences among themselves, and to value those differences. When students' cultures and experiences are appreciated and valued in the classroom, students are empowered (Lopez, 2011), and when students are empowered, it helps them increase sense of engagement and academic achievement. This is hard work, but as Lopez (2011) suggests, it is important for teachers "having a critical space to engage in enquiry, and the urgency for centring and foregrounding culturally relevant practices in teacher education programs" (p. 90).

Since students come from 120 plus tribal languages and cultures, teachers might not be familiar with all cultures present in the classroom, and this might impact their pedagogical practices. However, teachers need to be

aware of the differences, mindful, positive, and having respect for cultural differences (Huang & Kou, 2012). Therefore, teachers may overcome this challenge by giving students sufficient chance to share their cultures during classroom dialogues and discussions. In this way, all students will feel valued and both the teacher and students will learn from each other.

This study therefore, calls for professional development courses for teachers so that they might become aware of culturally responsive pedagogies, and thus be able to include them in their classrooms. Professional learning is necessary to build teachers' knowledge of how to teach students from diverse cultures, as in the case of Tanzania, having 120 plus diverse languages and cultures. I argue that culturally responsive practices might open the possibilities for change in English language teaching practices in a Tanzanian English language classroom in order to meet the needs of all students and to enable them become effective in global communication and interactions.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has explained the need to include students' first languages and cultures when learning English to allow them learn it more successfully.

5.1 Conclusion

This study has explored the teaching and learning of English in secondary schools in Tanzania. The study has revealed that students' languages and cultures are prohibited in school premises as teacher participants believed they hindered students from learning English. The study has also revealed that students who were speaking other languages than English were punished. Teacher participants also appeared to blame the education system in Tanzania for using Kiswahili at primary education level that it has contributed in the students' failure in secondary education, not only English subject, but also other subjects. This study has argued that students' knowledge of their first languages and cultures is important in learning a second language, English. Therefore, it could be suggested that, for teaching and learning of English to be more effective, students' first languages, cultures and experiences need to be considered. In this way, teachers can engage students in a meaningful learning since their experiences and cultural knowledge are a resource for learning. This in turn, students will engage in meaningful learning and see English as the language they can use to speak about their self-identities, and be able to use it for both local and global contexts.

5.2 Recommendations

This study has raised both practice and policy implications. That, teachers need to understand the importance of students' first languages in learning

English. The teaching of English should enable students to communicate and interact effectively within and outside the country, and not only be focussed on passing examinations. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to think positively about others and to be empathetic, tolerant, respectful, and accepting of the different languages and cultures students bring to the classroom (Holliday, 2009). Tanzania is a multicultural society, and therefore teachers need to be aware of the diversity in cultures students bring to the classroom. This study recommends that students' first languages and cultures should be regarded as resources and not as obstacles in

learning English. When students' languages and cultures are included in learning English, will reduce the sense of alienation they experience, which will in turn help them to see English as a language that speaks about their daily lives. This study therefore suggests that pedagogical materials and approaches should consider students' diverse cultures. The study also recommends the policies of language of instruction and communication to be re-visited so that the education provided to students should be meaningful to them and for their sustainable future.

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