

Multilingualism and Education in Africa

Multilingualism and Education in Africa:
The State of the State of the Art

Edited by

Daniel O. Orwenjo, Martin C. Njoroge,
Ruth W. Ndung'u and Phyllis W. Mwangi

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P U B L I S H I N G

Multilingualism and Education in Africa: The State of the State of the Art,
Edited by Daniel O. Orwenjo, Martin C. Njoroge,
Ruth W. Ndung'u and Phyllis W. Mwangi

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INTRODUCTION

This book *Multilingualism and Education in Africa: The State of the Art* is an edited volume that addresses crucial issues related to the multilingual nature of the African continent and how this aspect has interacted with educational practices in Africa. Generally, Africa is highly multilingual. This multiplicity of languages has created a number of challenges, especially in education, as many African countries draft and implement their language policies. This volume interrogates the current state of affairs with regard to the efforts by the respective African governments in addressing these challenges and implementing realistic and beneficial language in education policies.

As evident in the content of a number of chapters in this book, in many African countries, the language of power is linked to the language of the colonizer which therefore enjoys high status and more functional privileges in most public domains. This language is in most cases the official language and/or language of instruction. As stated in the chapter by Chabata in this volume, for example, this language becomes the most important one overshadowing the local languages. In Kenya and Uganda, former British colonies, for instance, English is a high status language, a factor which largely shapes the prevailing language attitudes in these two countries.

As noted elsewhere in this volume (see Chapter 15), despite the advantages associated with international languages such as access to modern technology, employment opportunities and the ability to engage the wider world, the need to feature African languages in African schools, both as taught subjects and as media of instruction has gained socio-cultural support. Language communities in many African countries have voiced the need to prioritise the development and use of African languages in schools as one sure way of removing some of the obstacles faced by the African child in school. Although there are many factors that lead to failure by African children in school, for example, shortage of learning resources, teacher incompetence and lack of a conducive learning environment, the use of foreign languages is one of the major problems.

The chapters that form this volume fall under three broad sections. The first section, *Multilingualism and language in education policy in Africa*, comprises four chapters. First is a chapter by Wangia, Furaha and Kikech

that evaluates the nexus between the languages of instruction versus learning in lower primary schools in Kenya. The chapter advances the view that the language of instruction is critical for children to obtain the skills and knowledge that are necessary to advance to higher levels of learning/knowledge/education. The authors note that the language of instruction not only affects the child's acquisition of basic skills in education but can also help the child in successfully meeting the challenges in their lives. The chapter concludes that an appropriate language of instruction improves the child's opportunities to access and succeed in education.

In chapter 2, Oyoo addresses the language of instruction and science learning in African science classrooms. The focus is on the instructional language as used by the science teachers based on the role of language in all learning including school science and teacher intervention in the learning of school science. The objective of the chapter is to suggest an approach to the use of language by science teachers, appropriate to the general international science education community, which may lead to an enhanced understanding of scientific concepts. The chapter notes that while proficiency in the language of instruction is necessary for social interaction in the classrooms, learning science involves more than mere social interaction; it also entails deliberate formulation and sharing of ideas. There is need for instructional language to be appropriate in all respects.

Baleeta and Islei's chapter discusses key issues affecting the implementation of the thematic curriculum from Primary 1 to Primary 4 in Uganda. It contains teachers' reports on the immediate contextual factors that affect delivery of the curriculum and how their perceptions, beliefs and skills interact with delivery of the curriculum at the vital point of classroom practices. The chapter addresses the factors that are involved in creating the degree of success or failure in children's learning and discusses the importance of such factors.

Sambaré's chapter traces the introduction of bilingual schools in Burkina Faso discussing the practices and challenges of this particular reform in Burkinabe's education system. The chapter is, therefore, a situational analysis of the integration of bilingual education in the Burkinabè education system. It gives an overview of bilingual education in Burkina Faso, rates its performance and outlines its limitations in the country. The chapter argues that if bilingualism in schools is to be cascaded to all areas in Burkina Faso, issues such as teaching staff, the overall aim of bilingualism and other pertinent issues related to bilingualism need to be addressed keenly.

The second section, *Multilingualism as an educational resource in Africa*, comprises seven chapters. Ndungo and Mwangi's chapter, the first in this section, discusses the benefits of mother tongue in early childhood education citing Kenya as an example. The authors argue that mother tongue needs to be reinforced as a transition language between home and school as the child gets prepared to use the foreign language(s) used as medium of instruction in upper primary. They observe that a solid education should begin in mother tongue and the objective should be to teach each child to write and read in his or her own mother tongue.

Ngugi's chapter examines the use of children's literature in multilingual education in Kenya. This chapter provides a rationale for an integrated approach to using children's literature in a multilingual classroom in the lower level classes. This is based on the premise that literature is language in use and can therefore be exploited for language learning purposes; that is, English, Kiswahili and mother tongue. The author notes that literature can be used to further the learner's mastery in the four basic areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Further, literature can be used in understanding other people's culture, thus inculcating the values of living in diversity as the children grow up in a multilingual/ multicultural society. The chapter points out that the recognition and affirmation of diversity is one fundamental way educators can promote understanding in the minds and actions of young learners.

Tyonum's chapter discusses multilingualism and education in Nigeria, specifically the practices and the challenges associated with this phenomenon. The chapter analyses the practices of multilingualism in Nigeria by presenting the positive and the negative consequences in education, social, economic and administrative spheres. It then draws conclusions /propositions and recommendations that can alleviate the difficulties inherent in a multilingual learning environment in Nigeria. The chapter concludes that in as much as the existence of multiple languages in Nigeria affects education, an ethnic language should be used alongside English, the language of education. Adoption of such a policy is hoped to remove the bottleneck caused by multilingualism to national development.

Matafwali and Adriana's chapter examines language diversity in Zambia and assessing whether this diversity is a cause of reading difficulties among learners. The chapter highlights the importance of oral language in the acquisition of literacy skills and discusses the factors underlying the unfavorable literacy levels in Zambia.

Weber's chapter discusses multilingualism and multiculturalism as resources for students in German studies classrooms in Kenyan universities. The chapter suggests that German studies in Kenya and the rest of Africa

should incorporate “teaching of German as a (foreign) *culture*”. The author argues that lecturers should draw upon the cultures and, by implication, the languages of their students as resources that allow for a deeper understanding of the intrinsically inter-cultural and multi-relational nature of the language and cultures of the German speaking world.

Adeyinka’s chapter discusses the benefits of mother-tongue education in early childhood: the case of Nigeria. The chapter argues that the use of the mother-tongue in early childhood promotes rapid development and saves many indigenous African languages from extinction. The author observes that Africa will rise to the challenges of becoming a developed continent if she encourages the use and development of her indigenous languages which are full of her rich cultures and traditions.

Boulleys’ chapter is a discussion on language, education and development in Cameroon, particularly, focusing on the German colonial approach and perspectives for post-independent Cameroon. The author argues that there is an urgent need for a revision of the country’s language policy so that it reflects the socio-cultural realities of the Cameroonian society. The chapter concludes that a review and redistribution of functions between the official and national languages will uphold the linguistic balance in Cameroon.

The third section, *Attitudes and challenges of multilingualism and education in Africa*, comprises eight chapters. Mutiga’s chapter titled *value addition and attitude change in language revitalization: the case of Kitharaka* begins this section. In this chapter, the factors that led to the marginalization of Kitharaka are highlighted. Further, examples of other currently or formally marginalized languages of Kenya are given. The chapter further examines and illustrates the role played by literacy and the on-going mother tongue education programme in the revitalization of Kitharaka in Kenya.

Kanana’s chapter examines the growth of English as a status language in Africa drawing insights from Kenya. The chapter discusses the complexities of language use in different contexts and how language users interpret the choice of each language by different interlocutors. The author argues that revitalization of African languages can only be influenced by decision-makers by not only coming up with policies that encourage the development and use of all languages at different levels, but also actively implementing these policies and fostering positive attitudes towards these languages in people by expanding their domains of use. The chapter concludes that when speakers see some social status or socio-economic value in their languages, they will certainly wish to maintain them.

Njoroge, Ndung'u and Gathigia's chapter investigates the variations in the spoken English of teachers in Kenyan primary schools who are drawn from different language backgrounds. The chapter seeks to determine the variety of English that the teachers teaching in Kenyan primary schools present to their learners and whether the variety differs from the norm of correctness prescribed for use in Kenya's English language curriculum. The chapter also discusses how the ethnicity variable impacts on the spoken English as used by the teachers in the classrooms. The chapter concludes that Kenya should utilise her local brand of English if the language in education has to be practical and meaningful to learners and teachers.

Chabata's chapter is a discussion of multilingualism and linguistic democracy in Zimbabwean schools, zeroing in on current practices, challenges and prospects for the future. The chapter interrogates the issues of linguistic rights and linguistic democracy in respect of the need and practicality of using various Zimbabwean languages at different levels of the country's education system. The chapter discusses the prospect of raising the country's marginalised languages, specifically in the education system. In doing all this, the key issues of language policy and practice, language policy in education, language choice, children's educational language needs, etc, will be interrogated.

Akach's chapter is an evaluation of teachers' attitudes towards the sign language medium of instruction in South Africa. The author recommends that there is need for further research to determine what is lacking in Deaf Education in Africa.

Ntalala, Orwenjo and Gecaga's chapter on L1 proficiency in multilingual educational settings in Kenya follows. Given the role of L1 in the learning of additional languages, the authors argue that primary school pupils are likely to have a difficult task accessing the rest of the curriculum (which is in English). At the same time, due to their limited proficiency and mastery of their mother tongue, pupils may resort to using code-mixing, code-switching and lexical borrowing.

Muthwii and Kazungu's chapter addresses multilingualism and education in Africa, highlighting on-the-ground realities and activities of the Multilingual Education (MLE) Network of Eastern Africa. The chapter outlines some of the objections people often voice against multilingualism in education and then goes on to describe the specific activities of MLE-friendly organizations. It indicates how these organizations partner and how they engage one another and local communities.

Mwangi's chapter, which closes the section, is based on the oral literature materials collected from various speakers of representative African

languages in Kenya. The chapter illustrates how we can use oral literature drawn from the different languages spoken in Kenya to develop proficiency in English oral skills as advocated by the new secondary school syllabus (KIE, 2002).

The chapters in this volume point to the importance of embracing multilingualism in education in Africa despite the challenges that must be surmounted. It is clear that multilingualism in Africa is a reality to be recognized and reckoned with in the enterprise of life. The linguistic diversity that characterizes Africa needs to be understood, harnessed and managed especially in the education domain. The bottom line is that all languages in Africa need to be revitalized and used in all spheres of life because they are our languages, our culture, our gift and a pillar for Africa's development. As noted by Njoroge (2012), exposing the citizenry to these languages will help bring up a people who are skilled, creative, and great problem solvers, thereby fostering development in Africa. Indeed, Africa must be ready to use her diverse tongues to tell her story and explain herself to the world. For the African masses to participate in national development, they must first of all be able to tell their story in their own tongues.

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PART ONE:

**MULTILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE
IN EDUCATION POLICY IN AFRICA**

CHAPTER ONE

THE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION VERSUS LEARNING IN LOWER PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN KENYA

J. I. WANGIA, M. FURAHA AND B. KIKECH

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the efficacy of language of instruction in Kenya. It evaluates the nexus between the languages of instruction versus learning in lower primary schools in Kenya. The chapter advances the view that the language of instruction is critical for children to obtain the skills and knowledge that are necessary to advance to higher levels of learning/knowledge/education. Further, we note that these early years are the most critical developmental years. Therefore, education must be concentrated on providing language support to achieve the set goals. The language of instruction not only affects the child's acquisition of basic skills in education but can also help the child in successfully meeting the challenges in their lives. The chapter concludes that an appropriate language of instruction improves the child's opportunities for education access and achievement.

In many African countries, the language of power is linked to the language of the colonizer which therefore enjoys high status as many studies (e.g. Bagwasi, 2004; Sonaiya, 2004) have shown. This language is usually the official language and/or language of instruction. It becomes the most important language overshadowing the local languages. In Kenya, a former British colony, English is a high status language, a factor which largely shapes the prevailing language attitudes (Muthwii, 2007; Kioko et al., 2008).

Background to the Study

The language policy in Kenya has had a great impact on the language of instruction and learning in lower primary schools. There have been many changes effected in the language policy from the colonial to the current times. During the last years of colonial rule in Kenya, the language policy in place then gave English the force which enabled it survive as the official language in Kenya after independence. It was also the language of education and upward mobility.

In 1951, there was a call by the Education Department's Annual Report to start teaching English in lower classes in primary schools to eliminate Kiswahili and mother tongue. English was then used as the medium of instruction in the Asian schools. Eventually it English was used as the medium of instruction in all grades of primary schools throughout the country. There were three categories of schools: European schools, Asian schools and African schools. In the African schools, twenty mother tongues were used as the media of instruction as recommended by the 'Beecher Report' of 1949. English was taught as a subject from standard one and became the medium of instruction from standard five to eight. As a consequence however, Asian and African pupils performed poorly in English at the end of both primary and secondary school education. This was blamed on the switch from one medium of instruction to another. In 1957 the Department of Education came up with an alternative in which English and mother tongues were emphasized at the expense of Kiswahili (Mbaabu, 1996).

In 1964 the Ominde Commission recommended that mother tongues should not be used for instruction in primary schools except for a daily period of storytelling in standards one to three. The Gachathi Report of 1976 reestablished the use of mother tongues by recommending that the language of the catchment area should be the language of instruction in standards one to three. In the schools that lacked a common mother tongue in the classroom like in urban areas, Kiswahili was used. This is still the policy currently in effect albeit, theoretically.

Rationale of the Study

The advantages of providing education, particularly in the initial years of schooling in the mother tongue have been well documented (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2000; & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; among others). Skutnabb-Kangas (2006) and Phillipson (1992, 2009) strongly advocate that education in one's mother tongue is an unconditional linguistic human

right. Despite all the evidence to the contrary and the serious equity arguments supporting mother tongue medium of instruction, educational linguistic policy has tended to favour powerful majority languages at the expense of indigenous tongues (Ricento, 2006; Tollefson, 2006). Such has been the case in Kenya. Many still promote education in English as a guarantee of success in the globalised world where English has rapidly assumed the role of lingua franca especially in the business domain. The lack of resources in the various mother tongues has also been cited as an excuse not to use the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. Education practices in post-colonial countries coupled with powerful economic incentives to privilege English as the language of instruction made it difficult to promote mother tongue instruction, research findings notwithstanding.

The dominance of the mother tongue in the general community contrasts with, and fails to underpin, the use of English in the schools. The emphasis on English appears to go against the grain particularly among rural children for whom a third language is that of Kiswahili. Many rural schools maintain such draconian rules as, ‘no speaking of mother tongue while in the school compound’ and those caught doing so are severely punished. The “English Only” rule, which applies to verbal communication in schools – perhaps more honoured by its breach than by its effective implementation – exacerbates the problem (Nabea, 2009).

Literature Review

A lot has been written about language policy and language of instruction. This section explores a few insights from the African situation in general and Kenya in particular.

Language Situation in Africa

Many studies have been carried out and much has been written about language issues in Africa. A study documented by Multilingual Education Network, Kenya (Kioko et al., 2008) outlines the many questions raised about language use in Africa and attempts to answer them. These range from pedagogical questions such as, ‘Will using African languages as languages of instruction hinder the learning of a second language or the learning process itself?’ ‘How can teachers be equipped and supported for mother tongue based multilingual education?’ They move to policy questions like, ‘Is it too costly to introduce/implement multilingual education?’ They also address sociopolitical questions such as, ‘Why are

African parents resistant to mother tongue based multilingual education'? 'What are the implications of multilingual education on national unity'? 'Will the use of African languages cause Africans to be sidelined in a globalised world'? These questions give insight to the objectives being addressed in this study.

Simire (2004) explores the linguistic complexities of Nigeria where about 500 languages are spoken. The language situation of post colonial Nigeria is a direct reflection of the colonial administration linguistic policy. English is the dominant language with three local languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba recommended for national use by virtue of the large population of speakers. There are also the neutral codes: Anglo-Nigerian pidgin (ANP) and Arabic. Simire (2004) advocates for a multilingual approach in solving the countries linguistic problems:

In order to sow and nourish the seeds for articulate, meaningful and embedded national development... it is necessary for the Nigerian government... to reach the old and the young, illiterate and literate, male and female, lowly and highly placed individuals across diversified ethnolinguistic groups in their own codes.

The encouraging thing about the Nigerian example for Kenya is that in spite of the many languages, they have been able to do something – Simire (2004) reports that more than 100 codes are standardized and reduced to writing.

Similar concerns are raised for Botswana where English has the high status (Bagwasi, 2004). This is in spite of the fact that Setswana, a common mother tongue spoken by 80% of the population and only 35% to 40% can speak English either fluently or just at a basic level. There is a diglossic situation where Setswana is the national language and is widely used in every day communication in government offices, local business, transport, market place, traditional courts, political and social gatherings and in the home. English is the official language and the language of education. Although the linguistic situation of Botswana does not sound as complex as that of Nigeria, Simire (2004: 119) expresses the fear that, "...although Setswana is the dominant language in the country it will soon face competition from English which is becoming popular not just for educational and economic reasons but also for reasons of status."

From the few examples cited above, it is evident that many African countries still have to resolve many linguistic issues. Linguists and educational psychologists agree that the use of the mother tongue as the language of instruction in the early years of education has proven advantageous, especially where the development of cognitive faculties is

concerned (Trudell and Schroeder, 2007). Conversely, it has been demonstrated that classroom use of a language which is not the language already spoken by the child, results in cognitive and pedagogical difficulties. This was attested by research on experiences in six African countries: Botswana, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, South Africa and Tanzania (Okombo and Rubagumya, 1996).

The current research will therefore be relevant not just for Kenya alone but for the rest of the African countries dealing with similar linguistic phenomena.

Language in Kenya

Kenya, like all countries in Africa, is a multilingual country. It is situated in East Africa and comprises of a population of 40 million (2009 population census). In contrast to most countries in Africa, Kenya has a unifying African language, Kiswahili¹, which is understood and spoken as either a first or second language by most Kenyans. There are many factors defining language choice and use in Kenya. Kenya boasts of a rich language landscape with at least 42 local languages, one national language – Kiswahili, and English as the official language. In terms of status, Swahili and especially English are equally prestigious as compared to the vernaculars. Kiswahili is seen as a unifying language since it can be used by nearly all groups in such domains as trade, public rallies and so on. English is used in offices, the judiciary, big business and education. English is mainly associated with the elite and therefore the well to do. Mother tongues² or ethnic languages or vernaculars on the other hand, are relegated to local communities as home languages. People get united or linked along ethnic lines and express their identity through their mother tongue. English and Kiswahili therefore enjoy prestige whereas mother tongue is taken for granted.

Language generally is the key to knowledge, information and communication, an indicator of appropriateness of technology, a major element in elite formation and alienation and also a barrier to or equalizer of social, political and economic opportunities. Language plays a central role in the modernization and development of a country. The choice of the language of instruction therefore has significant consequences. The significance of choice is most critical for multilingual communities and more so those that grapple with prestigious language versus natural language.

This chapter addresses these issues in an attempt to look at the quality of learning in lower primary schools particularly in rural Kenya where

there is a major shift between the home language and the school language for the young learners. The language of instruction, particularly for Kenya being a post-colonial country with numerous indigenous languages, is a strongly contested issue. This chapter reflects on positive outcomes that can be realized when the medium of instruction is in the language familiar to young learners. The chapter looks at what challenges the learners and their teachers face in communication and to what extent these challenges may affect learning in general. It then makes recommendations on how these challenges could be addressed to improve the quality of learning.

Language of Instruction

The use of mother tongue in Kenyan schools is discouraged, sometimes punitively. Teachers punish pupils who speak mother tongue as this is seen to retard the acquisition of English and lower academic performance. This seems to be in line with theories constructed by scholars in the developed world, on the basis of their predominantly monolingual experiences. Some of the theories asserted, for example, that countries which are economically backward are also linguistically backward (Ferguson, 1962). In countries where the GNP is low, the languages are diverse and the countries are under developed as observed in Fishman (1968). A common language would obviously make for a more unified and cohesive Society (Kelman, 1971). Monolingualism is a necessary condition for modernization (Neustupny, 1967) and complete equality of status seems possible only in countries that have two or at least three languages. No country would conduct its affairs in four or more languages without becoming hopelessly muddled (Kloss, 1967).

However, ironically, local languages become very significant administratively as the administrative boundaries in the country are drawn along ethnic lines. The Kenyan Counties (formerly districts) define where which community lives. This has political significance. For example, ethnicity is often exploited for political reasons. Members of parliament are seen to represent a certain ethnic community hence, politically, mother tongue identity is emphasized and so is ethnic identity. This seemingly contradictory role of mother tongue and its significance is puzzling and confusing when we consider the status value attached to it.

The newly promulgated constitution of the republic of Kenya states that the national language of the Republic is Kiswahili. It also recognizes Kiswahili and English as the official languages of the Republic. It further states that the state shall promote and protect the diversity of language of the people of Kenya; and promote the development and use of indigenous

languages, Kenyan sign language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities (Chapter 2, article 7). Worth noting, however, is the fact that this constitution is not only strangely silent on the language of education, but it also does not specify how the development and use of indigenous languages is to be promoted.

A community expresses part of its identity in its languages of interaction and a healthy society makes choices that promote harmonious communities and confident individuals. Years of research have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language (Baker, 2000; Cummins, 2000 and Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). In today's diverse world, giving individuals' confidence also means giving them the ability to communicate outside their own language group, either in another national language or in an international language. In challenging coercive societal relations, early childhood mother tongue education gives children a positive and affirming mirror of who they are and who they can become within the society.

The concern with language of instruction is no mere academic exercise. There is an elaborate language policy as far as instruction is concerned. Language policy impinges directly on what is possible and not possible in education. The policy stipulates that mother tongue or the language of the catchment area (e.g. the predominant language in the case of a cosmopolitan setting) be used as the medium of instruction in the first three years of school. English and Kiswahili are taught as subjects. From the fourth year on, English is the medium of instruction. Kiswahili is taught as the national language. Both English and Kiswahili are examined as compulsory subjects at primary and secondary levels.

The above is the policy on paper but the practice on the ground is a different issue. There is a great disparity between the practice in the cosmopolitan areas - particularly Nairobi, the capital and the rural and semi-rural areas. This investigation focuses more on the rural scenario where the impact of language choice is significant.

The situation in Nairobi for instance is quite definite. In the up-market schools, English is used almost exclusively from lower primary and the learners do not have any major problems since English is the language of the catchment area. The slum areas tend to be unique. Many slums form around ethnic communities so you have many ethnic communities within a slum community. Swahili is predominant but indigenous languages also feature significantly. Schools around here will not have a problem if they stick to Swahili which is what normally happens.

The hypothesis therefore that city schools have fewer problems with the language of instruction than the rural schools. The focus of this study therefore is on those schools where English and/or Kiswahili are foreign yet they insist on using English as the medium of instruction in lower primary school. How this impacts on learning is the sought question.

The 1953 UNESCO Conference on the use of vernacular languages in education declared that the mother tongue was the best medium in initial education (Letsie, 2002). Letsie also observes that researchers have realized that learners who do not receive mother tongue education experience reading problems in all three facets of reading: reading speed, reading accuracy and reading comprehension, as opposed to those who receive it. She is of the opinion that presenting new information and ideas to young children in a language they are familiar with (mother tongue) lessens their burden as opposed to doing so in an unfamiliar one which slows their progress. She further argues that the use of mother tongue further promotes better understanding between the home and school as what the children learn can easily be expressed or applied at home. The children's parents are also in a better position to understand the children's problems at school and be of some help.

Sifuna (1980), Parry (2000) and Milon (1992) in Muthwii (2002) argue that the use of mother tongue as a language of instruction is used to facilitate children's development of concepts that enable them to acquire knowledge in a second or third language and to further help in exposing the children to the cultures of their communities. Anderson (1970) in Muthwii (2002) augments this when he says that long term experience now seems to suggest that a vernacular medium is educationally preferable because sound teaching must, to some degree, interact with the home life of the child and must initially be based on concepts formed during the child's pre-school experiences.

In a study carried out on language policy and practices in education in Kenya and Uganda, parents, teachers and pupils were interviewed. The study found that the language policies in place in both countries make a number of general assumptions and take their correctness for granted (Muthwii, 2002). One such assumption is that English is 'natural' to all children in a multilingual setting, which is not the case. The assumptions made definitely affect the implementation and success of the policies. The study also found that Kiswahili and English were preferred for different reasons by different respondents and that not many respondents preferred mother tongue to the two languages of wider communication even though mother tongue is by policy designated as the Language of Instruction in lower primary school.

Some of the arguments given for English as a language of instruction were that the language enabled one to become knowledgeable, get employment, communicate wider and pursue further studies. English was also rich as a language and a solution to multilingualism. However, the respondents also argued against its use citing reasons like language difficulty (reading and understanding), difficulty in reading and understanding mother tongue since all teaching is done in English. They also felt it led to cultural confusion.

Mathooko (2009) argues that for Free Primary Education in Kenya to be actualized, there is need to put in place certain structures such as those that enhance, promote and develop mother tongues. The language of instruction is one such structure. In his paper he suggests the training of teachers to equip them with skills in mother tongue instruction, preparation of learning materials, books and other resources. He contends that mother tongue in education provides the basis for the child's ability to learn, enhances the child's skills in singing, drawing, playing, cutting and gluing, playing games, reading nursery and primary stories, strengthens a child's sense of identity, better academic performance in later years among many other advantages.

Djité (2008) stipulates that whilst multilingualism is the most prominent feature of speech communities in Africa, the education of the African child is still locked into a monolingual policy of language substitution, a policy that imposes a language of instruction that the majority of learners do not know and that wrongly assumes that all learners possess the same backgrounds and experiences. He discusses emerging opportunities for innovation in education and learning that can better integrate local languages as media of instruction and posits that there is a strong positive correlation between language of instruction and achievement at school, and that the choice of medium plays a crucial role in the learning process.

It is clear from the foregoing information that the benefits of mother tongue instruction in the initial years of school are unquestionable. The current policy in Kenya supports or should support this. This study sought to explore the actual practice on the ground as reported in the next sections.

The Current Study: Classroom Observation

Using a qualitative approach, a survey was done in 24 selected rural schools across Kenya to establish the language used for instruction in lower primary classes i.e. standard 1 – 3 and to document the actual