

*The Importance of Mother Tongue as Language of  
Instruction in Light of African Experiences*

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*Abstract*

This paper explores the link between language and education and its role in development, while it traces back to the colonial history of education in Africa and how foreign languages contributed to the lack of establishing native languages as national official languages in many African countries, which created educational development setbacks. The paper focuses on Tanzania and Somalia experiences regarding to mother tongue campaigns. The paper also investigates the importance of mother tongue or first languages in the success of education. In this paper, the author followed the analytical, descriptive method and collected the required data from different references. The paper suggests that Somalia needs to reutilize its language in education, while not ignoring the practical obstacles impeding the use of Somali language in education. However, as history teaches us, we can overcome these impediments as we did earlier

**Keywords:** Africa, Education, Development, Obstacle, Language, Administration, Colonial

## ***Introduction***

There is a relationship between language of instruction and education and its impact on development. The colonial history of education in Africa reveals how education problems contributed to the hindrance of development in sub-Saharan Africa, (henceforth, Africa). Mother tongue or first language has a great role play in the success of education and, hence, the translation of this success or failure into development. In addition, there are colonial factors which contributed to the current educational problems of Africa, including the use of foreign languages in education, colonial era marginalization of native languages, and the domination of foreign languages in administration and education.

The argument of this paper is that the history and politics of African languages in terms of suppressing them in favor of foreign languages, and the demarcation of colonial borders, which contributed to the lack of establishing a native language as the national official language in many African countries, which might have been utilized in education and administration, have all contributed to African development problems. These problems, reduced the progress of educational development, which affected the socioeconomic development of African countries. In other words, language problems created education setbacks, and these education setbacks contributed to development obstacles. Many studies regarding to this article explored the importance of mother tongue in education: Analysis of the Influence of Mother Tongue on Students' Performance in English in KCSE in Public Day Secondary Schools in Gatundu District, Kiambu County, Kenya (Melorose, Perroy, & Careas, 2015); The Importance of Mother Tongue-based Schooling for Educational Quality (Benson, 2004): and Mother Tongue-Based

Multilingual Education in the Philippines: Studying Top-Down Policy Implementation from the Bottom Up (Burton, 2013), among others.

### ***Language and Education***

Mother tongue language is important in learning and in creating new ideas and thoughts; and that is because people usually think in their first language or mother language. For instance, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis asserts that the thoughts and activities of individuals are determined by their language; because people think in their languages. It is difficult for them to grasp realities, such as right/wrong, man/woman, normal/abnormal, among other things, if these realities do not exist in their languages (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). As a result, educators favor that teaching and learning take place in first languages.

### ***The Link between Language of Instruction and Academic Success***

The key connection between language and academic success is accessibility. A student's language, culture, and lived experience tremendously contribute to the students learning and retention ability. According to Gesheker (1980), "Developmental psychologists have found that people absorb information more quickly and more thoroughly when it is presented to them in their mother tongue" Gesheker (as cited in Adam, 1980, p. vii). In addition, education through mother tongue empowers and liberates. Moreover, knowledge is socially constructed and recognized, thus, when it is instructed in mother tongue it can be shared with the rest of the community and it becomes a social matter. Consequently, Maas (2001) maintains that "this implies creating an environment in which the learner knows and reads his or her text. And writes about his or her own experience as well as those of others, thus

allowing people to recognize their own mother tongue as a language of identity, thought, and instruction” Maas (as cited in Ouane & Glanz, 2005, p. 7). Hence, in Africa, it was not possible for the postcolonial African countries to utilize their native languages as medium of instruction in their schools due to the colonial legacy.

In the following section, we will discuss the colonial policies, which created the current education and language problems.

### ***Colonial Education***

Colonial education problems were many, but in this instance, we focus on two factors, which are (a) the language policies which were designed to suppress native languages and promote colonial languages; (b) the quality and quantity of colonial education, which was meant to create a lower level clerical staff, security apparatus, and interpreters, among others, who can speak the language to serve the interest of the colonial administration system.

European colonizers deliberately excluded indigenous knowledge and languages and replaced them with their own languages. For instance, in Somalia, colonial rulers introduced strict definitive language policies, which were intended to marginalize Somali and promote Italian and English. In the process, the colonial powers ignored the Somali language and discouraged its use in any role of the peoples' lives. English and Italian dominated the mediums of instruction and administration. Somali, however, remained the language of communication and dialogue at the social discourse level (Abdulaziz & Ouane, 2004).

These discriminative colonial policies were accompanied by an equally exclusionary education system, which was designed to serve the colonial interest. Hence, modern education, as colonial powers called it,

was introduced in Africa during the colonial period; however, it was limited to the learning of foreign languages and basic math to serve the needs of the colonial requirement for lower clerical staff and interpreters. Thus, in colonial education, Ayittey (1998) observes that: the colonial government also demanded conformist behavior for the preservation of the status quo and took steps to ensure that the education system served this purpose. While the missionaries were concerned primarily with teaching people to read so that they could absorb the lessons of the Bible, the colonial governments needed only obedient clerks. No large demand for technical skills was envisaged, as the colonies were conceived to be purveyors of raw materials and foodstuffs. (Ayittey, 1998, p.123).

Hence, this was the case in most African countries and these experiences started to negatively impact African education and economic development after independence. Thus, post-colonial education was equally disappointing to many African countries, mainly due to its colonial character.

### ***Post-colonial Education: the Legacy***

One of the faulty characters of the colonial education was its elitist nature - European constructed social hierarchy. As a consequence, when the European educated natives trained to assist and facilitate colonial administrations took over the leadership of their countries after independence, they became the new white ruling class and behaved the same as their former masters (Ayittey, 1998). That was because colonial education was designed for the colonial objective of domination as opposed to freedom, dependence as opposed to independence, and subservience as opposed to equality. Hence, after independence, all these facts proved to be correct. According to Nyerere (1979), “colonial

education induced attitudes of human inequality, and in practice underpinned the domination of the weak by the strong, especially in the economic field” (Nyerere, 1979, p. 18). Another problem of the colonial education legacy was that the majority of the people who were not educated self-consciously internalized and accepted their inferiority to the educated elite.

As a result, the post-colonial education of Africa became an extension of the colonial education due to two main reasons: first, the African educators’ experience was based on that of the colonial education and so all they had to do was to duplicate the colonial education that they knew. Second, the newly independent countries could not afford the financial means, which was required to overhaul their education systems; hence, the continuation of colonial education became the only available option.

### ***Inaccessibility of Education***

Foreign languages dominate education in Sub-Saharan Africa, and this is true whether these African countries are mono-lingual or multi-lingual in their own native lingual setting (Ouane & Glanz, 2005). The same is true in their official *foreign* language. The official *foreign* language character of the African countries was adopted during the colonial rule, after independence almost all of the African countries kept those foreign languages for several reasons.

### ***Language Dependence***

These countries realized after their independence how far these colonial languages are rooted into their sociopolitical and economic systems. That was the case because these languages were being used for decades of colonial rule, thus, all the national expertise and experiences

were recorded or archived in these foreign languages. Moreover, the administration and education systems were all conducted and instructed in foreign languages, and so the common perception was that perhaps it is much easier to pursue the continuation of the status quo rather than transform everything to the native language. This created dependence on the foreign colonial languages.

### ***The New Elite Factor***

The new class which took over the administration of the country from the colonial powers was educated in foreign languages and so it is natural to accept the status quo. In the Somali case, Gesheker (1980) points out how: the parliamentary governments throughout the 1960s failed to agree on a script for Somali, political and commercial power was restricted to Somalis literate in either English or Italian. A communications gap deepened the estrangement between the educated minority and the Somali masses who suspected that the government's non-decision on the language question was very much the decision of a self-sustaining administrative core to continue governing the rest of the population in languages few of them could read, write, or comprehend. (Introduction, p. vii)

The elite continued to stick with the use of foreign languages because that was what gave them their special privileged status and separated them from the majority of the people in terms of resources and power distribution.

### ***The Lingual Inferiority Complex***

Another discouraging factor was that, while the foreign languages like English and French were equipped with a wealth of knowledge,

including scientific and technological terminologies, the local languages lacked this vocabulary due to more than half of a century of domination and degeneration. Thus, Gesheker (1980) points out that “It is widely believed by the western-educated African classes that compared to European languages, African mother tongues are inferior, especially as vehicles for the expression of scientific and technological concepts and as a medium for government and commerce” (Introduction, p. VI). However, this did not stop countries like Tanzania and Somalia from realizing that language and education problems are man-made and therefore they can be reversed.

### ***The Predicament of Native Multilingualism***

The multilingual nature of many African countries discouraged them from using one of their languages as the official language. One of the causes of these many languages could be attributed to the colonial arbitrary borders which merged peoples of different languages and cultures into one country. The leaders of these countries sometimes bluntly indicate that choosing one of their languages could ignite a bloody civil unrest. There is some truth in this, but for once in their existence, people have to realize that languages are part of their national cultural resources and they need to utilize their resources. This needs a one-of-a-kind public education, which the contemporary African leaders could not undertake because they are part of the problem. Today’s African leaders politically survive through the old art of divide and rule. In addition, the social injustices that currently overshadow Africa is partially due to unequal resource distribution that African leaders are mainly responsible for. Apart from that, and all other things being equal,



African leaders could have made the decision to choose between one of their languages, and a foreign language.

### ***Education and Development***

Economic progress depends on many different variables that assist the realization of any developmental achievement goals, and one of the most important of these variables is the human resource capital. Thus, it is the trained and/or educated human capital, which realizes the establishment and utilization of other crucial factors, including capital, infrastructure, and technological know-how, among other things. On this basis, Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006) illustrate the contribution and “broader benefits of an advanced education manifested through entrepreneurship, job creation, good economic and political governance, and the effect of a highly educated cadre of workers in a nation’s health and social fabric” (Bloom, Canning, & Chan, 2006, p. 17). Hence, human capital is fundamental in the establishment and utilization of other resources. Similarly, an educated workforce contributes to the national development in many different ways, directly and indirectly. According to Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006), higher earnings for well-educated individuals raise tax revenues for governments and ease demands on state finances. They also translate into greater consumption, which benefits producers from all educational backgrounds. In a knowledge economy, tertiary education can help economies keep up or catch up with more technologically advanced societies. Higher education graduates are likely to be more aware of and better able to use new technologies. (p. 15). In this illustration, we can see how education is directly related to the socioeconomic development of a country and how education setbacks can translate into economic and developmental obstacles.

## ***The African Educational Development Program and the Tanzanian Experience***

After independence, some African countries realized the importance of education and its significance to development. These countries attempted to find a solution for the high illiteracy rate of their population by conducting National Literacy Campaigns. In 1967, Tanzania started the first literacy campaign in Africa followed by Somalia and Ethiopia in 1973 and 1975, respectively. According to a UNESCO report (1990) of the International Bureau of Education (IBE), Tanzania was the first African country to implement a National Literacy Campaign. In the following section, we will discuss Nyerere's African leadership in mother-tongue based educational development and the outcomes of his education development programs.

### ***The Tanzanian Effort***

President Nyerere was considered to be one of Africa's most revered statesmen and thinkers to emerge from the colonial era (Lusane, 1999). When Julius Nyerere became the President of Tanzania, there were pre-existing conditions that obliged him to find a solution for the problems of his country. Early on in the sixties, Africa was struggling with the colonial legacy of underdevelopment, due to lack of economic and development expertise, minimal education, worn out infrastructure, and lack of capacity building, among other problems. These problems were aggravated by the existence of the Cold War, which divided the world into two camps, which the continent of Africa was not entirely ready for at that time. The creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which was established by the newly independent countries in 1963 rallied the African political voice, but was not able to improve the dilemma of

economic underdevelopment. That was where Nyerere's concept of homegrown development started. According to my interview with Abdul Hamza, Professor of Dar es Salam University, Nyerere believed that colonial education lacked the relevancy and the ability to solve the African problems. Moreover, colonial education was designed to divide the society into classes of elite and non-elite. Thus, Nyerere created new development programs as solutions for Africa's poverty and economic underdevelopment. These programs included the Ujamaa Agricultural Cooperatives and the Adult Literacy Program. The Arusha Declaration, which was signed in the City of Arusha in 1967, was a political stand and a moral platform where a country and its people decided to declare their intent to develop and the strategies to utilize for that development.

### ***Nyerere and the Concept of Education for Development***

The concept of development in relation to education and literacy was characterized by the empirical correlation between illiteracy and underdevelopment. The people are the human resource of any nation and the foundation of development. Thus, to utilize this human resource, a nation has to invest in them first, and education is the first step to empower people. Bhola and Gomez (2008) report that:

President Nyerere of Tanzania had remarked that "Education is Development." While sustainable development is going to involve strategies that are both structural and instructural, the instructural is most important since the ability to understand and deal with structures is in itself a process of education. Again, while designing strategies for joining adult literacy with sustainable development, planners and practitioners should think about a word-to-work transition and carefully plan for post-

literacy activities both instructional and development. (Bhola & Gomez 2008, pp. 61-62).

It was this education for development that African countries were seeking to reform and reclaim as their own by utilizing their national languages as the medium of instruction and administration. Through their native languages, people can understand the value of education as a tool for prosperity and self-reliance.

*Ujamaa* Agricultural Cooperatives, and the National Literacy Campaign, which was based on the concept of literacy for development were in progress. While Nyerere was building his country, he was also travelling around Africa to spread his vision of development in Africa.

### ***The Rural and Adult Literacy Program***

In my interview with Dr. M. Abdullahi Hamza, a professor at the Dare Salaam University, he pointed out that “The Rural Adult Literacy Program was another ambitious program, which Nyerere implemented in Tanzania. In Tanzania, the Ministry of Education, together with the Ministries of Agriculture and other government Ministries was assigned to train government employees and volunteers to carry out the Rural Literacy Program.” Hamza, M. A., Dr. (2011, February 25).

Tanzanian literacy campaign (personal interview). Dr. Hamza indicated that the idea of the literacy campaign was not just to teach people how to write, read, and count, but it was to teach them how to participate in local, regional, and national politics, and at the same time understand the value and importance of production and self-sufficiency.” These educational programs took place in rural areas, especially the *Ujamaa* Cooperative centers and villages. The second leg of the literacy campaign took place in urban centers and focused on children over

fourteen years of age and adults who had not completed their primary education, Abdul told me. Children under fourteen years of age were covered under the universal primary education program.

### ***Achievements***

The Tanzanian development programs did not achieve their intended goals, at least economically. There were mixed reactions in Tanzania when the mass campaigns of rural literacy, Education for All, and *Ujamaa* Cooperatives were completed. For Tanzania and most of the African countries, the initiatives themselves were considered socially and politically successful; these successes also benefited the country because Tanzania positioned itself as a leader among African countries due to its pioneering programs. According to the UNESCO's IEB (International Bureau of Education). The United Republic of Tanzania was perhaps the first African country to give urgent attention to adult literacy. One of the immediate results of educating adults was to make them insist that schooling be provided for their children. The literacy campaign that started in 1971 reduced the 1969 illiteracy rate of 69 percent to 9.6 percent in 1986. In addition to the purely educational results, the demand for newspapers and books has increased; literacy participants have adopted health, nutrition, and balanced diet practices; their employment opportunities have increased; and the nation's political culture has been built (UNESCO, 1990).

In the international community, as Abdul Hamza told me, admitting the success of a socialist government during the Cold War was not easy, but at least nongovernmental international organizations recognized the success of Tanzania's endeavors. That is perhaps why countries like

Somalia decided to implement similar development programs in the 1970s.

### ***The Somalia Experience***

In Somalia, the revolutionary government of 1969-1990 in 1972 introduced Somali language orthography, after a long period of confusion and disagreement between the Somali linguists on what script is most suitable to utilize for the Somali language. The main disagreement was specifically between Arabic and Latin scripts. And to consolidate the application of the newly introduced lettering, the government declared two consecutive multi-pronged campaigns, the urban and rural literacy campaigns of 1973 and 1974, respectively. The two main objectives of such literacy campaigns were to make education accessible for the Somali people and to invest on a national development program through education, dubbed Education for Development.

Accordingly, “Two accomplishments with implications for education reform were the establishment of an official script for the Somali language in 1972, and the launching of two national literacy campaigns, urban (1973) and rural (1974). Both sought to overcome the legacy of elitist colonial educational policies” (Cassanelli & Abdikadir, nd).

At the end of the literacy campaign programs, therefore, it was declared to have achieved its two intended objectives of accessibility to education and the advancement of national development. Soon after, Ethiopia launched its category of the literacy campaign in 1974, and so the concept of education for development through literacy campaigns were embraced in Africa.

## ***Conclusion***

To understand the relationship between language and education, we need to reflect the role of mother tongue language in learning. For many years, educators involved themselves to establish the importance of mother-tongue language and its role in education, as opposed to foreign language instruction. In many African countries, including Somalia, the use of foreign languages as medium of instruction continues to this day. Thus, with the knowledge of the importance of mother-tongue language in education, the question is, why are we still utilizing foreign languages in Somalia?

Somalia's problems, in my opinion, are partially rooted in the education setbacks, including the use of foreign languages in education. And historically speaking, Somalia began to use the Somali language as a medium of instruction in schools in 1975, to study elementary to high school and this continued until the destructive civil war of 1991. Hence, in this post-conflict period of our history, Somalia needs to reinvent itself and attempt to re-utilize its language in education. Practically speaking, there are many obstacles impeding the use of Somali language in education, but as history teaches us, we can overcome these impediments as we did earlier.

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