

# Language-in-Education Policy and Academic Performance of Students: the Case of Tanzania

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores language-in-education (LIE) policies within post-colonial contexts, with a specific focus on Tanzania. It provides a systematic exploration of the multifaceted factors that shape these policies and their profound impact on academic performance and educational outcomes in the country. Specifically, the article examines the relationship between policies prioritizing students' mother tongue or familiar language and academic performance. Additionally, it assesses the influence of policies favouring the language of the past colonizer on academic outcomes in primary and secondary education. The theoretical foundation of this study is Critical Theory, a framework which illuminates the power dynamics and social inequalities inherent in policy development and implementation. It provides insights into how dominant linguistic groups exert influence in decision-making processes and how language policies perpetuate existing social hierarchies. The study holds significant research value, as it addresses the pivotal role of LIE policies in shaping educational outcomes and socio-economic opportunities within multilingual societies. It acknowledges the contentious nature of language and education debates within the African context, especially in primary education. A key contribution of this research is its holistic approach. Unlike studies that solely focus on academic performance metrics or isolated variables, it considers a wide range of societal, historical, and political factors that intersect with language policies. This comprehensive view allows for a deeper understanding of the challenges posed by English as a third language in Tanzania's educational system. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of engaging multiple stakeholders, ensuring teacher readiness, and incorporating the perspectives of students to effectively implement LIE policies. It emphasizes the need for increased government commitment and public awareness to develop inclusive and equitable policies that promote quality education and social justice. In conclusion, this article offers valuable insights into the complex landscape of LIE policies in Tanzania. It calls for a nuanced approach that considers the unique context of each post-colonial nation to develop pragmatic and equitable language policies conducive to desired educational outcomes.

**KEYWORDS:** Language policy, language-in-education, Tanzania, education, academic performance, postcolonialism

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## Introduction

■ **Implementing multilingualism in education within post-colonial countries presents a complex set of challenges rooted in institutional and cultural factors. The endeavour is further complicated by persistent resource constraints, as the delivery of instruction in various languages (including local, national, indigenous, and former colonial languages) demands a level of expertise that many educators may lack (Wiley et al., 2014). Additionally, the influence of international development organizations and influential donors often directs educational agendas in ways that may not align with the best interests of learners in schools (Chimbutane, 2017; Brock-Utne, 2010).**

To address these challenges effectively, it is important to tailor language policies to the unique context of each post-colonial nation. This approach ensures that policies are not only pragmatic but also equitable and conducive to achieving desired educational outcomes. This article undertakes an in-depth examination of language-in-education (LIE) policies in Tanzania, offering a systematic exploration of the multifaceted factors shaping these policies. The research endeavours to shed light on the impact of these policies on academic performance and elucidate the key explanatory factors and distinctive features that influence the intricate relationship between LIE policies and educational outcomes in Tanzania.

The following research objectives were identified:

1. To investigate the relationship between LIE policies that prioritize the use of students' mother tongue (MT) or familiar language and academic performance.
2. To assess the influence of LIE policies that prioritize the language of the past colonizer on academic performance in primary and secondary education.

The study has adopted the Critical Theory framework, as proposed by McLaren and Giarelli (1995), as its foundational theoretical basis. This choice is rooted in the framework's capacity to illuminate the power dynamics and social inequalities inherent in policy development and implementation. Critical Theory enables an exploration of how dominant linguistic groups exert influence during decision-making processes

and how language policies and practices perpetuate existing social hierarchies. In the field of education, the critical movement aligned with social theory emphasizes the intricate interplay between social systems and individuals, highlighting their mutual impact and revealing the inherent contradictions that underlie social life (Leonardo, 2004). Moreover, Critical Theory serves as a valuable perspective for examining the influence of international development organizations and donors on the power dynamics that shape policy formulation and implementation.

The study's investigation into LIE policies in postcolonial contexts holds significant research value. Such policies are instrumental in molding students' educational outcomes (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009) and carry wide-ranging implications for individuals and communities in terms of socioeconomic opportunities (Shoba & Chimbutane, 2015). Notably, within the African context, debates surrounding language and education, particularly in primary education, remain highly contentious (Trudell, 2016).

## Language-in-Education Policy in Education: Literature Review

In this section, the discussion revolves around the concept of "language policy" (LP) as found in academic literature, with a focus on the absence of a consensus regarding its definition. Spolsky (2017) makes a distinction between LP as an academic field and LP as a normative document within the scope of language management, a subfield of linguistics pertinent to the field of education. Johnson (2013), on the other hand, provides an all-encompassing definition of language policy, which encompasses official regulations, unofficial mechanisms, the influence of various agents on policy development, and normative texts shaped by specific contextual factors.

In scholarly discourse, the compound term "language policy and planning" (LPP), as coined by May & Hornberger in 2008, is frequently employed. This terminology is particularly prevalent in the examination of how educational settings and policies related to indigenous languages tend to sideline minority languages. Within the realm of education, Kaplan & Baldauf (1997) introduce

the concept of “language-in-education planning”, primarily concerned with the selection of languages for instructional purposes (LOI). Johnson (2013) offers a definition for “educational language policy”, encompassing both formal and informal policies that influence language usage in schools.

A fundamental distinction between many post-colonial nations and the European context lies in the fact that European nation-states largely evolved around the central concept of a single “national language”. As pointed out by Coulmas (1988), the European ideal of “one nation, one language” cannot be straightforwardly transposed to developing countries, particularly in areas such as Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. The concept that each nation should have a singular language runs counter to the intricate demographic and political landscapes prevalent in these regions.

Researchers who examine the dynamics in post-colonial settings also engage in discussions regarding LIE policies within the broader context of development and globalization. As argued by Bamgbose (2014), language and culture hold pivotal roles in the process of development, and the neglect of African languages is identified as a primary factor contributing to the shortcomings of various continental and global development initiatives in Africa. Similarly, Tikly (2016) posits that the presence of inconsistent LIE policies can have detrimental repercussions on the development of linguistic proficiencies among marginalized groups, subsequently impeding their progress in other educational domains, such as basic literacy and numeracy.

Spolsky (2017) underscores that educational policy is shaped not only by national governments but also by a multitude of actors, including regional organizations, governmental ministries, local authorities, school administrators, educators, parental committees, private sector entities, religious institutions, and the media. It’s worth noting that the role played by past colonial states and development agencies is an area that has been inadequately explored. This is particularly pertinent in the context of newly-established states, as these actors wield significant influence in shaping educational policies. For instance, Chimbutane (2017) delves into the role of international development organizations, characterizing them as “language policy arbiters” in Mozambique and Tanzania. Mazrui (2000), a postcolonial theorist, highlighted in the Tanzanian context how the World Bank appeared to maintain a dual stance, officially favoring Kiswahili while providing de facto funding

and support for English as the language of instruction in primary and secondary schools. A similar concern is voiced by Brock-Utne (2010), who emphasizes the actions of British and French donors employing development aid to advocate for their respective languages as the LOI in African schools. This situation often results in educators being compelled to teach in English without possessing a sufficient level of proficiency, leading to the widespread use of code-switching (Wiley et al., 2014).

Extensive research and scholarly discourse have centered on the impact of diverse language policies on the academic performance of students in developing nations characterized by linguistic diversity. A recurring concern in this context is the marginalization of minority languages in educational systems (Tikly, 2016). LIE policies that emphasize both MT and first/second language (L1/L2) instruction have gained substantial recognition (Ssebbunga-Masembe et al., 2015). Studies indicate that endeavours to assimilate linguistic minority students into the dominant language, such as English, can impede their cognitive development and restrict their educational prospects (Webb, 1999). It is well-established that bilingual students need to attain a certain level of proficiency in L1 to avoid cognitive disadvantages before transitioning to the use of a second L2 or third language L3 (Cummins & Swain, 2014).

Furthermore, it has been found that children hailing from minority language backgrounds reap advantages from bilingual programs that place a premium on nurturing their MT (Ssebbunga-Masembe et al., 2015). The utilization of the MT during the early stages of education plays a constructive role in fostering the acquisition of English language skills. This underscores the critical significance of establishing a robust foundation in the L1 to facilitate a seamless transition to the L2.

Consequently, LIE policies in the realm of education are significantly influenced by political and ideological considerations, imbuing language-related educational matters with a highly political nature and making them susceptible to disputes (Ssebbunga-Masembe et al., 2015). The adoption of bilingual education as an alternative approach may not enjoy unanimous endorsement, especially among influential government decision-makers, particularly within the education sector. Discrepancies between national language policies and their translation into classroom practices further erode the intended impact of local language policies, particularly in the early stages of primary education (Trudell, 2016).

## Language-in-Education Policy in Education: The Case of Tanzania

Tanzania stands as a multilingual nation, boasting a remarkable linguistic diversity, with 150 indigenous languages spoken within Tanzania, in addition to English (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2012). The linguistic landscape in Tanzania exhibits a triglossic configuration, with Kiswahili serving as the national language, English holding the position of the official language, and a multitude of indigenous languages coexisting.

The prominence of English in Tanzania is rooted in a colonial ideology that continues to regard English as the language symbolizing civilization and progress (Neke, 2005). During the colonial era, colonial powers recognized Kiswahili as a suitable lingua franca for the entire East African region. Kiswahili played a pivotal role in the struggle for independence due to its widespread usage. Following independence, the Tanzanian government adopted Kiswahili as the national language and actively promoted its use. Given that the majority of Tanzanian languages are Bantu-based, Kiswahili is generally easily acquired by the broader population (Barrett, 1994).

However, English has concurrently been advanced as a language of education and development within Tanzania. In 1995, the government introduced the Education and Training Policy, affirming that English would be the medium of instruction in secondary schools and universities. Subsequently, in 1997, the government issued the Cultural Policy, designating Kiswahili as the national language and recognizing English as an official language. However, a notable omission in the policy is the explicit specification of which language should function as the medium of instruction in schools. This ambiguity has resulted in perplexity and inconsistencies in language usage within the education system.

Roemer (2023) contends that Tanzania's language policy reflects the country's historical evolution and its contemporary political and economic landscape. He observes that the socialist policies championed by Julius Nyerere emphasized Kiswahili as a language fostering national unity and development. However, following Nyerere's tenure, the government shifted its focus towards economic development and began to promote English as a language conducive to international trade and investment.

The current language policy in Tanzania represents a delicate balance between two competing ideologies. While Kiswahili remains the national

language, English is steadily gaining ground in education and various other spheres of public life. However, as emphasized by Swilla (2009), such language policies are often designed to perpetuate the privileges of those in positions of authority. Swilla advocates for the government to explicitly designate both English and Kiswahili as languages of education. The language policy in Tanzania aspires to produce a younger generation primarily proficient in English and secondarily as active members of Tanzanian society (Roy-Campbell & Qorro, 1997). Nevertheless, this objective faces challenges, given that the majority of Tanzanians receive only primary school education (Neke, 2005).

Numerous policies and formal declarations have played a pivotal role in elevating the status of Kiswahili in Tanzania. These efforts include the designation of Kiswahili as the national language in 1962 and its establishment as the official language of the government five years later. Despite these initiatives, English has endured as the medium of instruction at the post-primary level (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2012). The most recent language policy, the Education and Training Policy, was released in 2014 and reportedly put into practice in 2015 (Mohr, 2018). This policy mandates the utilization of Kiswahili as the medium of instruction across all levels of education and training.

Scholars have engaged extensively in discussions concerning language policy and English Language Teaching in Tanzania. These discussions have encompassed topics such as language attitudes, the deficiency in English language proficiency, and the adverse impact of the policy on the learning process (Vuzo, 2021). Some have characterized the system as "miseducation" (Ngonyani, 1997), while others have referred to it as "subtractive bilingualism" (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2012). The debate surrounding the introduction of Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in Tanzania encompasses a variety of perspectives. Critics argue that the promotion of Kiswahili is primarily driven by nationalistic and cultural considerations rather than pedagogical ones (Rubagumya, 1986). Conversely, proponents of Kiswahili often overlook arguments related to its suitability in pedagogical contexts and instead emphasize its benefits (Barrett, 1994).

The sociolinguistic landscape in Tanzania further solidifies the continued prevalence of Kiswahili as a unifying language, with urban children increasingly adopting it as their primary means of communication (Brock-Utne, 2006). Kiswahili



enjoys widespread understanding and usage across Tanzania. It finds extensive application in various domains, including newspapers and national institutions (Brock-Utne, 2006), and is even viewed as an indicator of social status (Roemer, 2023). The perpetuation of English in education tends to benefit the elite, as their children frequently possess greater proficiency in this language. As secondary schools multiply, and a growing number of individuals compete for the same employment prospects, English assumes a pivotal role in upholding the privileged position of these elites. English essentially functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, resulting in a substantial number of students failing each year (Barrett, 1994).

Recent studies indicate shifting attitudes towards English, with favourable perceptions no longer confined to the elite but extending to younger generations as well (Mohr, 2018). The linguistic landscape in Tanzania reflects a multi-layered context: the acquisition of vernacular languages at home, the use of Kiswahili for national communication, and the predominance of English in higher education, the judicial system, diplomatic relations, and international trade (Barrett, 1994). The perception of English as being closely tied to education, knowledge, progress, and modernity has resulted in the establishment of a hierarchical classification of languages. In this hierarchy, English is deemed superior and advanced, while Kiswahili is often negatively regarded and considered inadequate for educational purposes (Neke, 2005). Consequently, the transition to Kiswahili as the MOI in secondary education necessitates a challenge to prevailing monolingual ideologies.

In terms of implementation, Kiswahili obtained official recognition as both a national and official language in Tanzania, and it was adopted as the MOI in primary schools. Conversely, English was introduced as a mandatory subject in primary schools and concurrently employed as the MOI in post-primary education. However, right from the outset, this arrangement contradicted the stated ideal, as Kiswahili was not utilized as the MOI in post-primary education. This system persists to the present day, with Kiswahili serving as the exclusive MOI in primary schools and English as the sole MOI in secondary schools and higher education institutions (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2012).

The language policy in Tanzania reveals notable contradictions between the stated policies and their practical implementation (Swilla, 2009). One significant contradiction stems from the fact that while government directives emphasize Kiswahili

as the medium of instruction in primary education, privately owned primary schools, which cater to a substantial portion of Tanzanian students, opt to use English as the MOI. As a result, a significant proportion of Tanzanians have not achieved an adequate level of proficiency in English (Gadelii, 1999). The original vision of the independent Tanzanian state aspired to produce bilingual and biliterate citizens proficient in both Kiswahili and English. Although this objective envisaged an additive bilingual education system, it was not explicitly articulated in an official document (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2012). Conversely, proponents of English-language instruction in Tanzanian education argue that limiting access to education through this language would relegate the majority to second-class citizenship (Neke, 2005).

The LOITASA project aimed to investigate language policies and experimental designs related to the LOI in Tanzania and South Africa. Despite the significance of such large-scale projects, the study underscores that the findings often receive inadequate attention or are not taken seriously by the government (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2012). This lack of consideration for research outcomes in policy-making indicates a gap between research and its practical implementation.

Brock-Utne (2006) conducted an observational study that focused on secondary school students. The study sought to assess the impact of using English as the language of instruction compared to using the students' familiar language. The results demonstrated that instruction in English significantly slowed down the learning process, with teachers covering only about half (or two-thirds in some cases) as much material in English-medium lessons compared to lessons taught in the students' familiar language. In contrast, teachers using the familiar language reported greater ease in teaching, followed their lesson plans more effectively, and observed increased student engagement. The study underscores the potential efficiency and positive outcomes associated with employing students' MT or familiar language in education process.

In a recent investigation conducted by Roemer (2023), a close examination was carried out regarding the first-hand experiences of multilingual students in Tanzania in relation to the government's language policy. This policy prescribes Swahili as the medium of instruction at the primary level and English at the secondary level. The study offers a valuable perspective directly from the students themselves, delving into their perspectives

and recollections concerning language coercion. The research uncovers that students frequently encountered disciplinary measures, including public humiliation, for failing to speak the mandated language, which included both Kiswahili and English, when their native language was one of the indigenous languages.

Moreover, the study sheds light on the fact that a considerable number of students dropped out of secondary school due to the stringent language policy and the associated disciplinary actions. Nevertheless, some students expressed appreciation for their teachers, crediting them for their acquisition of a L2 and for pushing them to excel academically. These findings underscore the necessity for inclusive language policies that prioritize students' native languages while teaching additional languages as subjects, fostering a positive and supportive learning environment.

These findings emphasize the potential advantages of prioritizing students' MT or familiar language in education, including enhanced learning outcomes, increased student engagement, and the establishment of an environment conducive to learning. The studies also underscore the importance of refraining from punitive language enforcement and promoting the inclusion of native languages in education.

These findings also need to be contextualized within the challenges reported by other researchers. In government secondary schools, English is intended to be the medium of instruction, but teachers often resort to using Kiswahili (Barrett, 1994). This is because many teachers feel more comfortable teaching in Kiswahili and may lack proficiency in English, leading to a reliance on the vernacular language for effective instruction (Marwa, 2014).

Similarly, students in Tanzania encounter difficulties with English proficiency. While some students admit to better understanding their teachers when instruction is conducted in Kiswahili, the majority still believe that English should remain the language of instruction in secondary schools (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2012). However, the overall lack of English language skills among students is evident (Barrett, 1994), and the low admission rates into secondary schools further underscore the limited opportunities for students to acquire English proficiency (Brock-Utne, 2006). Parental attitudes also contribute to the language policy landscape, as parents view English as a pathway to well-paid jobs and socioeconomic opportunities, leading them to prefer enrolling their children in private schools (Swilla, 2009). Insufficient

resources further compound the challenges of implementing the language policy. Currently, there is a lack of suitable Kiswahili textbooks for secondary schools, and the availability of English textbooks is limited, making the learning process even more challenging (Tibategeza & du Plessis, 2018).

Overall, in Tanzania, there exists a clear dissonance between English as the language of instruction and the national language of Kiswahili. English is not a language of national unity, placing a significant burden on students whose native language is Kiswahili. With many students also having a vernacular language spoken at home, English becomes a L3 for them, with Kiswahili often serving as their L2. The lack of proficiency in English ultimately contributes to low academic performance and high dropout rates in secondary schools.

## Conclusions

The research presented in this article adds valuable insights to the ongoing debates concerning the intricate subject of LIE policy and its effects on students' academic performance, especially in highly multilingual societies. Unlike studies that solely focus on academic performance metrics or isolated variables, this research takes a holistic approach by considering a wide range of societal, historical, and political factors that intersect with language policies.

In the Tanzanian context, the challenge posed by English as a third language has emerged as a significant impediment to academic performance. This challenge is particularly pronounced because the majority of students already speak a vernacular language at home, making English their L3. Consequently, many Tanzanian students encounter difficulties in pursuing or completing their secondary education.

In addition to the examination of LIE policies, this research delves into the intricate dynamics of multilingual societies. It is acknowledged that the effectiveness of LIE policies cannot be evaluated in isolation but requires an exploration of the linguistic composition of the society itself. This entails understanding the diverse roles and functions that different languages play within the social fabric.

Furthermore, the findings of this study lend further credence to the hypothesis that the successful implementation of LIE policies hinges on the involvement of multiple stakeholders (Spolsky, 2017). Equally critical is the readiness and capacity of teachers to navigate the challenges inherent

in teaching within diverse linguistic contexts. Additionally, the experiences and perspectives of students themselves, who actively participate in the education system, must be taken into consideration.

In conclusion, the observations made in this study bolster the hypothesis that there is a pressing need for increased government commitment and public awareness to facilitate effective LIE policies. This entails considering the advantages of instruction in the L1, dispelling misconceptions, and providing support for indigenous languages within a bilingual education framework. The development of inclusive and equitable LIE policies is paramount for attaining quality education and advancing social justice in post-colonial contexts (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997).

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