



---

**Challenges Associated with Use of the Foreign Language as a medium of Instruction in Tropical African Education Institutions**

---

**Dr. Lubwama Joseph Ntege**

**Email Address: [joselubwesa@gmail.com](mailto:joselubwesa@gmail.com)**

**Kigali Independent University**

***28<sup>th</sup> November, 2019***

**Abstract**

This study explores and identifies challenges associated with the use of the foreign Languages as medium of instruction in the Tropical African Education Institutions across the board. The paper focuses on the practices existing in Uganda, Burundi, Eritrea and South Sudan by a team of experienced instructors and highly trained Education Managers. The study would have focused on many foreign languages but English was chosen because the writer is highly trained in the use of the English language. Data collection was through use of semi-structured interview guides. Random sampling method was used to determine 20 instructors and 30 students from each of these countries for the face-to-face interviews. Data collected was analyzed using the content analysis method. It was established that learners in the Tropical African Education Institutions find a lot of difficult in learning using foreign languages. Learners have their mother tongues interfering and they depend a lot on them for communication which prevents them from practicing use of the imposed foreign Languages. It was also found that the National governments have little or nothing to do as they lack funding of their education systems so they must continue to use the foreign languages to solicit continued funding of their education.

The weak students in classes not only hate the languages but also the instructors who attempt to force them to learn through these foreign languages. The dominance of the strong learners makes it worse for the weak ones find themselves irrelevant in the class. This drives them into regular absenteeism and even when they attend the lessons, they occupy the behind seats just to do watt sapping on their telephone hand sets and also to talk to their friends so as to end up the lessons. At University level, once they sign the attendance lists, they quickly disappear.

The effective use of foreign languages as a medium of instruction should start as early as the starting classes of Basic Education if anything good is to be realized. Similarly, the teaching and learning should be only in the these Language without interference of the native languages and students with language proficiency weaknesses should be encouraged to practice speaking, writing and all communication needs to be done in these foreign languages for masterly. Finally, it is recommended that despite these foreign languages being second languages students should be motivated to study in well equipped learning environments with appropriate teaching materials.

**Keywords:** Higher Institutions of Learning, Mother Tongues, Teaching and Learning, Problems and solutions

### **Introduction**

The part of Africa south of the Sahara desert and north of the South African Republic is the sub-region commonly referred to as the Tropical African Block and it is characterized by countries officially using their former colonial master's languages as mediums of communication in public places and instruction in education institutions. The languages include: English, French, Portuguese, Latin and Arabic because of its dominance in some of these places like the Sudan. Interestingly, the natives of these countries unconditionally use these languages imposed on them in return to financing their countries' annual budgets. Parents pay huge sums of money in order for their children to learn them and therefore consider them as a symbol of having attained education and being civilized. As they grapple learning them and learning through them, there are challenges associated to the process which the Tropical African learners inevitably bare. These challenges are keeping Africans in a stand still position which would not have been the case if they were learning in their own native languages (Nkrumah, 1963).

Yoweri Museveni (2018) observed that much of what has happened on the African Continent owes its genesis to lack of Education by Africans and in the true African native languages. He further said as he addressed the African Summit on languages for communication, in Kampala, that much of what has happened in Africa is due to lack of Education by Africans themselves and in the true African style and above all, interest.

In the same direction, Robert Mugabe (2005) at the graduation ceremony of the University of Harare indicated that the low education levels on the African continent stem from students being bothered to learn foreign languages first like French, English, Latin, Portuguese, Germany , Arabic etc and forcing the Africans to cherish them proudly as if they are their own languages. Pan Africanist Wanzare, Z (2000) condemned all those who preferred English to native Swahili. His argument was that if one started learning in the native language it would be easier for that learner to understand and use English faster in his/her studies. Starting off with these languages and using them all through the school system affects the attainment levels of the learners and at the end learners neither master their own native languages nor the foreign languages. Linguist

Holland , (2015) wrote that making Tropical Africans to use foreign languages in school systems is one canning way of destroying their cultures.

This has been supported by Appolo Nsibambi (1998) when as Minister of Education was addressing the Ministry of Education Sector review meeting said that this trend of affairs has retarded learning of our children and therefore is responsible for the slow development in almost everything on the African continent. Nsibambi (1998) also asserted that in the early years of learning the Tropical African children attempt to learn in their native languages in order to grasp and master it properly. Although this is good, Local government leaders in the bid to please their European funders force their teachers to put more emphasis on the use of foreign languages calling it modernity. Nsibambi (1998) was worried that this syndrome was fast sweeping across all the populations of Tropical African countries. Parents claim that based on the cost of education, their children should learn in the foreign languages to make them compete with their European counterparts in the job market.

Nsibambi (1998) lamented that it is all confusion because some schools start straight away with use of foreign languages and others with use of local languages and somewhere in the mid primary embark on use of foreign languages just a short time before they enter into Universities. He is unhappy with the short time spent learning the foreign languages and therefore performance cannot be compared with their counterparts who were born speaking it.

Robert Mugabe (2005) denied the assertion that English children learners are faster and cleverer compared to their African counterparts. He supported his argument with the fact that while Africans attempt to learn foreign languages in which learning is conducted, the Europeans are busy studying the real designed content. He wondered how new comers in foreign languages may outcompete the owners of the languages in performance with that advantage of studying straight away while their counterparts are struggling with these foreign languages. He challenged the European students to attempt competing with Africans in their own native languages as it is for the Africans. Definitely the results would depict the same picture being floated that European learners being faster learners than Africans.

This article attempts to expose the challenges associated with the use of foreign languages as a medium of instruction in Tropical African education institutions and the solutions to the challenges. The choice of the writer over this topic was based on the fact that he has the experience of studying in English (one of the foreign languages imposed on Tropical African education institutions as a medium of instruction) and he easily interacts with the students in the region of study to gather their views over the challenges they face with using English as a medium of instruction and also to solicit for solutions to these challenges.

## Situational Analysis

The education levels of the people of Tropical Africa, according to Taylor (1963) are extremely low compared to western students. Southern Italy in 1914 for example had a literacy rate of only 25%, less than twice that of Middle Africa in general today, Taylor (1963). The literacy rates in Tropical Africa today range from a high level in Kenya and Uganda of 60% and above, to down the level of 25% in Upper Volta, the Niger and the Chad Republics. Tropical Africa generally, has a literacy rate ranging between 10% and 15%. There is also a bare minimum literacy rate in native languages of which Africa has over one thousand. Less than a hundred of these have been brought up to mere writing but also there is significant publishing in just a handful of them. The only African languages with a widespread use outside their own tribal areas are Hausa of central Sub-Saharan Africa and Swahili of East Africa, but both are potentially hybrid in nature. So if literacy in English, French, Arabic or other European languages is to be taken as the standard, then the figure of 10% will be reduced further down. This partly contributes to the justification of using English as a medium of instruction in the Tropical African education institutions.

In Middle Africa, the percentage of people of appropriate age attending school is quite disappointing not because the education institutions are lacking but because the would be learners claim that the cost of education is unaffordable. Unfortunately, the number of children out of schools continue to rise even with the introduction of free education in basic education levels, (World Bank, 2005). Everywhere the educational pyramid is flat with a far greater percentage of children in primary than secondary schools and worse still in institutions of higher learning like Universities and unfortunately in Pre-Primary schools (World Bank, 2005). This is in sharp contrast with the educational pyramid in the United States which is very steep-sided and with a substantial percentage proceeding from each level to the next level (Cunnings worth, A., 1995).

Language is an important part of an educational path. Therefore as you increase your ability and use of language, you increase your ability to learn and to teach within a community. Everything we ever learn and teach is based and expressed through languages. No matter what that language is, the principal idea is to express information and skills through the use of that language Dahmardeh, M. (2009). Furthermore, Dahmardeh, M. (2009) asserts that the importance of languages in the education path is its use of it to communicate thoughts, ideas, information and data. He concluded that language use is vital for everyone participating in a particular education setting to have the same level of language skills and proficiency in order for communication of ideas and information to be passed effectively.

Class attendance is the best demonstration of the rapid growth of education today in Africa. Kenya leads with 75% of the learners at school and the rate ranges down ward through Nigeria and the former Belgian Congo with 55% to the Niger Republic with only 3%. Generally, in Middle Africa, 40% of the learners attend classes averagely on a daily basis and available studies accuse use of foreign languages like English to be the cause for poor attendance because learners

pick little from the lessons conducted in foreign languages, (Dickinson, L., & Carver, D., 1980). According to Edge, J. (1996) the attendance rate would be higher up, like it is in European classrooms, if classroom instruction was in languages learners understand quite well. In Middle Africa, the situation is aggravated in institutions of higher learning where only less than of the would be students are attending on a daily basis. The reasons for lack of daily and consistent attendance are the use of foreign languages which they do not understand quite well (Edge, J. 1996). These level posses the sharpest contrast between Middle Africa and the Western World.

### **Importance of Teaching using the English Language**

According to Opare (1999),there is a long list of advantages of learning English and in English, but the following have been chosen to facilitate the discussion: English being a widespread language and internationally spoken and taught in many schools of different countries, the students benefit from it as their communication opportunities are enormous. It is also asserted that students who have been taught in English may access some of the world's best universities like Harvard, Yale, Cambridge, Oxford etc which everyone is yearning to study from, (Farhady, H. and Hedayati, H. (2009). It is widely assumed that upon entrance into these universities learning will be smoothly done. It is also believed that expanding your horizons and learning about a different culture is one of the prime aspects of a good education system. Having the ability to be exposed to life and people outside your native tongue expands cultural horizons and allows you to see the world from another vantage point, (Hangoke, 2015). With English being one of the many common languages being taught, a person who is able to speak the language opens up opportunities to study at many education institutions and will be in position to communicate with people and cultures at a very diverse level (Behroozi, M., & Amoozegar, A.,2014)

In Tropical African Countries, a variety of languages exist in each of these countries. In the Democratic republic of Congo for example there are over five hundred tribes and in Uganda there are over fifty officially recognised dialects which would all like to learn in their native dialects, (Crystal, D.,1997). If this was respected then there would crop in the issues of curriculum design and writing, teachers, authography, text books and failure to communicate with other dialects that cherish their own tribal languages. It was observed that national and international communication would be a problem. Countries faced with the dilemma of a common local language choose to use the former colonial masters' language that unify everybody. In countries like Burundi that have a common language, the foreign languages are preferred for merely international communication.

According to Crystal, D. (1997) having learnt using English increases ones' chances of getting a good job in a multinational company both locally and in other outside countries because many people speak it. He further said that learning English is important for socializing and entertainment as it is internationally used in communication media like the internet.

## **Challenges Associated with Teaching in English Language in Tropical Africa**

The learning in English is highly valuable depending on both the instructors and the students' levels of proficiency which determine the manner and setting in which teaching – learning is conducted. The proficiency of the instructor and the learners determines the love by learners for the teaching- learning process and therefore the regularity and attendance of the students and even the relationship between the instructor and the student (Chastain, Kenneth,1988). If the instructor and the student understand one another then we expect self- directed learning to take place also but if not then the reverse takes place creating a vacuum in learning.

Then, there is the danger of large classes that threatens the learning in institutions of learning across the board. Most education institutions have large and rather cumbersome to teach classes (World Bank, 2005). These are in hundreds at basic education levels and some threaten in thousands at university level (Brown, H. D., 1973). Such big classrooms actually look like rallies or symposiums. Although the student numbers are increasing every time there is no attempt to increase the infrastructure and equipments of these education institutions. These large class numbers tend to be associated with issues of class size, furniture provisions and discipline control making teaching communicatively difficult. Some learners who do not fit in the classroom sit in the windows and others attend from outside. All these issues are associated by lack of communication gadgets like loud speakers to enable those far way to hear what the instructor is teaching. In this regard education managers tend to advise on breaking these classes into several teachable groups but lack of teachers poses a big challenge. Usually group work is a good teaching approach, in large classes it is impossible hence reaching individual students is practically difficult.

There is also the challenge of low instructor proficiency in English and their limited experience with communicative language teaching. Many of the teachers in the Tropical African education institutions have low competence in English and have limited experience to teach communicatively. They are not majors in the English language and have limited grammatical and lexical competence. Many are ignorant of communicative language teaching skills and very often such instructors turn to teaching using the mother tongue or in a mixture of languages unclear to any person, after failing to express themselves in English. If instructors lack proficiency it implies that they cannot give what they lack. Proficiency of the teachers and the way they teach is one of the major challenges to the success of any learning in a foreign language. Those education institutions that have attempted to recruit teachers observing proficiency have ended up registering shortages in the teaching staff across all learning areas in these Tropical African education institutions, Akbari, (2014).

Many Tropical African education institutions lack auditory or visual teaching aids necessary for effective teaching especially in large classes e.g loud speakers, recorders, cassettes, computers, projectors etc. Instructors/ teachers on the other hand don't present pictures or diagrams that would make clear their teaching messages in such large classes but basically depend on the use

of the traditional teaching method of chalk and talk and using the native languages in multilingual class settings. This is to the benefit of only those who understand the native languages that the instructor is able to use.

A good number of Tropical English teaching Universities after admitting even students from other countries organize quick drills at the start of the first academic year. Due to large classes, lack of teaching aids and the low proficiency of the lecturers these Universities put emphasis on grammar and limited reading skills while oral skills i.e speaking and listening are completely ignored. The ignoring of oral skills leads to students being incompetent in communication efforts. When these students embark on university teaching content with such limited capacity to communicate during lecture time and in examinations their performance levels are undoubtedly low, Beattie (1995). It is common practice for students to be found failing to read from the internet, text books and to participate in discussions and presentations as a result of weaknesses in communication using one major international language.

Since students lack proficiency in English just like their instructors, they ignore attendance of lectures and participation in discussions and presentations. They don't bother to read text books or from the internet to gather capacity to answer course work and final examination questions. It is also common practice for students to find other people to do course work exercises and to involve themselves in final examination malpractices, Beattie (1995). The instructors who also assess the work of the students equally have issues of proficiency to do a good job. They end up being compromised and end up imagining what their candidates wanted to mean as they answered the questions whose answers they are attempting to assess.

Most students often will like those instructors/teachers who are less strict in the use of English but dislike those who attempt to make them use it and correctly. The classes of the strict instructors will attract poor attendance and comments about these instructors will be unpleasant. Even fellow teachers/ instructors will side with the weak students to ensure that those strict instructors operate under difficult conditions until they win them to their side. This is keeping very low Tropical African education institutions' standards which affect the quality of work force that is sent to the labour market.

Universities exist to conduct research for community development. This can be done as part of fulfilling the requirements for the award of degrees to its successful candidates. This can be done by the lecturers and other associate staff. If the staff lack English language proficiency, then they may not be in position to prepare their candidates in the direction of writing good research reports. This will hinder both university and community development.

Since the saying, "garbage in, garbage out" we may not expect lecturers with low proficiency in English language to prepare a teaching force that may do the teaching better than their teachers who prepared them. This undoubtedly, will compromise the standard of education of a country. Many scholars who have been writing about the education standards of countries in Tropical

African Countries have only been making statements but not explaining the causes for the low education standards.

There is also the danger of content translation in the teaching in native languages in Tropical African schools and Universities. Translation does not enable the student to understand directly from the lecturer but picks a few things from the translations effected by an individual put in place to translate. In some instances the translator ends up also making another teaching far away from what had been prepared to be taught. This makes students finally not understanding but memorizing that little content that was either rightly or wrongly translated, (Ahymadpoor, Z. (2004).

It is widely believed by parents, teachers/lecturers and the students themselves that providing summative assessment will drive students into reading on their own Behroozi, M., & Amoozgar, A. (2014). While this would be true and students' private reading helps in saving time, one wonders what kind of reading will take place if students have reading weaknesses. Further, the attainment level is questionable. Summative assessment is a method that most failed instructors/lecturers use instead of the student – centered learning that enables the student to lead the teaching- learning process

## **Conclusion**

Tropical African countries cannot fund their education systems and so entirely depend on the dictated terms of their major funders. What the funder prefers because it promotes the funders' interest must be implemented without question. No matter whether it is in Tropical African Interests it must be done. The issue of foreign languages as medium of instruction has been on the agenda for discussion in many forums of Tropical African countries but it has never taken off for fear of being denied funding. What must be done to overcome this? Practically the total answer can be found in one phrase: raise the level of the economy. With enough money, and with the skills, facilities, and knowledge which money can buy or produce, most of the problems can be overcome. This can be done because many Middle African countries have already clearly demonstrated that they are willing to use a large proportion of their own little money for the development of education. However, although in most of the Tropical African countries the economy is rising at a faster rate than in most of the Western world, the taxation base is still so low that it will still be many years to come before anything like a satisfactory economic level can be reached. This is interpreted to mean that so much of the necessary money will have to come from foreign sources. Tropical Africa needs money for direct development of education, but even more desperately it needs capital for long-range economic development, which will in turn produce the money with which to further develop the education system.

Basic education students and University graduates from Tropical Africa are not able to express themselves in English efficiently and fluently and learning these days has become a night mare due to lack of an appropriate and preferred language as a medium of for instruction.

## **Recommendations**

The issue of medium of instruction has become a real paradox for the Tropical African Governments. While some countries side with purely teaching in one commonly identified and



preferred language, the challengers of this opinion pose the countrymen lacking capacity to communicate internationally. They also claim that they will have a very limited scope of getting jobs and lack of interlink for research work. If then, this line of argument is to be followed, then chosen foreign language should be taught as a subject with emphasis on speech skills right from the first class of the country's education system.

Another school of thought is teach in the native languages in lower classes of the country's education system and introduce the chosen foreign language like English after Mid primary school classes as a medium of instruction. The chosen foreign language should be taught as a subject from day one of the school education system. If this school of thought is taken then care should be made not to allow mother tongue interferences as the use of the chosen foreign language takes effect. When the foreign language is used as medium of instruction, the native language s should be taught as lessons.

It is also highly recommended that at no one time should there be a mixture of native and foreign languages as medium of instruction because it generates a real mess that will stain the learning process.

## References

- Ahymadpoor, Z. (2004). Studying the Problems of EFL Teaching in High Schools. *The Roshd ELT Journal*, 18(71), 15-21.
- Akbari, Z. (2014). The Role of Grammar in Second Language Reading Comprehension: Iranian ESP Context. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 122-126.
- Amatobi, V. E., & Amatobi, D. A. (2013). The influences of gender and attitude differences to students' achievement. *American Journal of Research Communication*.
- Bada, E., & Okan, Z. (2000). Students' language learning preferences. *TESL-EJ*, 4(3).
- Beattie, M. (1995). New prospects for Teacher Education: Narrative ways of knowing teaching and teacher learning. *Educational Research*, 37(1), 53-70.
- Behroozi, M., & Amoozegar, A. (2014). Challenges to English Language Teachers of Secondary Schools in Iran. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 136, 203-207.
- Birjandi, P., Soheili, Gh., Nowroozi, M. & Mahmoodi, Gh. (2000). *English High School 1*. Tehran: Iran Textbook Publisher.
- Brown, H. D. (1973). Affective variables in second language acquisition. *Language Learning*, 23, 231-244.
- Carver, D. J., & Dickinson, L. (1982). Learning to be self-directed. In G. S. E. In M. Geddes (Ed.), *Individualization*. London: Modern English Publications.

Chastain, Kenneth.(1988). *Developing Second Language Skills* , Theory and Practice. United States of America: Harco urt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge University Press:Cambridge.

Cunningsworth, A. (1995). *Evaluating and Selecting EFL Teaching Materials*. London: Heinemann.

Dahmardeh, M. (2009). Communicative textbooks: English language textbooks Iranian secondary school. *Linguistic Online*, 40(4), 45-61.

Dickinson, L., & Carver, D. (1980). Learning how to learn: Steps towards self direction in foreign language learning in schools. *ELT Journal*, 35(1), 1-7.

Edge, J. (1996). Cross-cultural paradoxes in a profession of values. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30, 9-30.

Farhady, H. and Hedayati, H. (2009). Language assessment policy in Iran. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 29.

Holland ,P.E., (2015). Principals as Supervisors. A balanced Act. NASSP Bulletin, 88(3), 1-14 Doi: 10.1177/019263650408863902.

Mugabe R.(2005). Education for Modern Africa, Zimbabwe Times: A Speech at Harare 98<sup>th</sup> Graduation, Harare.

Museveni, Y. (2018). Contribution of African Languages to Teaching Effectively, New Vision News Paper, Page 23, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2018, Kampala Uganda.

Nsibambi A. (1998). New Vision News Paper: Minister Speaks out on Status of education to Education sector Review Meeting, Kampala, Uganda, Pg 23, 12<sup>th</sup> November 1998.

Opare J.A (1999). Academic Achievement in Private and Public Schools Management Makes a Difference: Journal of Educational Management.

World Bank, (2005). Education in Ghana: Improving Equity, Efficiency and Accountability of education Delivery, Washington D.C: World Bank

Wanzare, Z (2000). Supervision and Staff Development: Over View of the Literature. NASSP Bulletin 84(618) 47-54. Doi: 101177/019263650008461807.