

# The Influence of Mother-Tongue Maintenance on Acquisition of English Language Skills among Day Secondary School Students in Imenti South District, Kenya

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## Abstract

In Kenya, English is a very crucial language. For a long time English has been the sole official language in the country, but after the promulgation of the new constitution in 2010, Kiswahili was accorded the status of an official language too. English is a compulsory subject in secondary school education. Proficiency in English is very critical for a student who wishes to compete favorably with other learners in the country for prestigious careers and consequently jobs. In Imenti South District day schools, little is done to enforce the use of English among students' interaction in their day today activities. The study established that mother-tongue maintenance influenced the acquisition of English language skills in day secondary schools. Since mother-tongue is a hindrance to the acquisition of English language among day secondary school students, the study recommends that school administration and teachers should enforce rules to limit the use of vernacular in students' interaction. It is the

responsibility of the school administration to ensure that students use English language while in school. Other programs in school like debates and discussions should be put in place to build confidence and proficiency in students in the use of the English language.

**Keywords:** Mother-tongue maintenance, Acquisition of english language skills, Day secondary school students

## 1. Introduction

English a second language for most of the people of the world, has increasingly become the international language for business and commerce, science and technology and international relations and diplomacy. In fact, it is estimated that although there are only 325 million people who speak English as a native language in the world's 4.7 billion population, there is an additional 1.4 billion people who use English as their official language (Crystal, 1985). This has prompted researchers to ask how much assistance is being provided to learners of English as a second language in order for proper acquisition to take place. Wesche and Ready (1985) point out that second language acquisition is subject to individual variation. This was detected in linguistic modification made by two English native speaker teachers teaching English to non-native speaker students. Hawkins (1985) however warns that a learner's response might not be reliable because non-native speakers can give signals that they understand the items they are receiving when in fact they do not understand. These are some of the unique problems that are associated with acquisition of a second language.

In Kenya, English is the official language of communication together with Kiswahili. It is taught in schools as a compulsory subject. It also functions as a language of instruction in education as well as an international language for various tasks of economic development. It is also largely used for communication in the judiciary, parliamentary debates and in public administration. English is taught in secondary schools in order to enhance communication during and after life in school. However, the influence of mother-tongue maintenance negatively impacts on the acquisition of what is taught by the teachers of English to students during English lessons hence hindering the realization of expected communication skills. Pozzi (2001) points out that in Kenya, education is taken as the foundation of economic as well as individual development. One of the goals of education in Kenya is to produce citizens with skills, knowledge and personal qualities that are required to support a growing economy. Kenya aims at building her modern economy to meet employment of her people and provide resources for human development. Since fluency in English is a basic requirement in Kenya's quest for modern development and technology, caution must be taken in order to counter anything that might hamper the proper teaching and reception of English in secondary schools.

The acquisition and learning of English skills in relation to students' individual considerations is very important at the moment, because at times a learner factor can be ignored or even frustrated during language classes. The students even if they are eager to master the language they cannot under some conditions as they are heavily influenced by factors like mother-maintenance that impact negatively on their endeavors (Vilnensia, 2004). In order to acquire a second language successfully, an enabling environment should be provided in order to remove or lessen difficulties that hinder achievement of reasonable competence in the language.

### *1.2 Objective of the Study*

The study investigated the influence of mother-tongue maintenance on the acquisition of English language skills among day secondary school students in Imenti South District in

Kenya.

### 1.3 Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive survey method of research. The goal was to find, to investigate and describe the influence of mother-tongue maintenance in the acquisition of English language skills in the location of the study. The description was based on the written/oral tests like conversation and an investigation of the opinions, feelings, attitudes and perceptions of the students. Good (as cited in Mugenda, & Mugenda, 1999) observes that the purpose of descriptive survey research is to secure evidence concerning existing or current conditions, identify standards or norms with which to compare present conditions in order to plan the next step and determine how to take the next step having determined where we are and where we wish to go.

#### *1.4 Location of the Study*

The research was carried out in day secondary schools in Imenti South District. This area was chosen because it has a diversity of day secondary schools. Some are in and close to the district headquarters while others are in the interior rural set-ups. The selection of this district for the study was prompted by the fact that it is relatively new and no related research has been carried out in it. The District has also witnessed poor performance in English.

#### *1.5 Population and Sample*

The population comprised form two day secondary school students within Imenti South District. The form two students were used because they are already one year old in their school and therefore it was expected that they can interact freely. Form three and four students are normally busy preparing for their examinations, while form one students are still very new in the school.

According to Imenti South District Education Officer, there are 35 day secondary schools with a total population of 1954 form two students. In Imenti South District there are 45 English teachers who were targeted in the study and it was from this number that the researcher did the sampling.

In sampling a small group is selected from the big group or population of the study (Begi, 2009). Purposive sampling was used to select the eight schools from the population of 35 day secondary schools in Imenti South district. The main objective of purposive sampling is to pick cases that are typical of the population being studied (Kathuri & Pals, 1998). All eight English form two teachers one from each selected school were involved in the study.

The researcher further used stratified random sampling. In stratified random sampling the researcher divided the population into different strata or categories (Begi, 2009). The day schools in Imenti South district were divided into two homogenous subgroups and then a simple random sample was taken from each subgroup. The day secondary schools in the district were classified into two: Category A: Rural-oriented day secondary school and Category B: Urban – oriented day secondary schools

Rural-oriented day secondary schools are those found in the remote areas of the district, where access to some facilities like libraries and proper roads are lacking. Urban-oriented day secondary schools are those situated in towns as well as near the tarmac. These schools have access to facilities like Kenya National Library Services and other well established boarding secondary schools, where exchange of ideas through symposia is possible. To ensure better representation for every category, two lists were prepared representing each category after obtaining the list of the day secondary schools from the District Education Officer. There were 18 day secondary schools under category A and 17 schools under category B. In each category each school was assigned a number based on the distance from the school to the town centre, in order to avoid selecting schools that are neighbors. This was guided by purposive sampling whose main objective is to pick cases that are typical of the population being studied (Kathuri and Pals, 1998). Then the researcher picked four schools purposively from each category thus making a sample of eight schools. Since there were 1954 form two students in the 35 day secondary schools in Imenti South district and a population of 399 form two students in the selected 8 day secondary schools, a representative sample of 25% of the population of form two students was used in the study. A useful sample should be large enough to allow generalization. It should be above 10% of the total population (Begi, 2009). This enabled the researcher to get a sample of 100 students in total. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) a sample size of 100 respondents is acceptable for a descriptive research. Also Anderson (1990) attests to this where he claims samples in the 100 to 200 range are rarely brought into question on the basis of size.

### *1.6 Instruments*

The researcher prepared and administered a writing test in form of a dialogue between the student and his/her friend. This was given to the students to test their oral and writing skills. Students wrote a conversation that displayed their level of language. There was a questionnaire for form two students and another for form two English teachers.

### *1.7 Data Analysis*

The data collected in this research was analyzed using descriptive statistics, which includes percentages, and frequencies. The results are discussed below.

#### *1.7.1 Influence of Mother-Tongue Maintenance*

The study inquired from teachers of English if vernacular speaking was rampant in their schools. According to Long (1990), language acquisition is strongly facilitated by the use of the target language in interaction for this tends to bring about good performance. From the findings, (75%) of the teachers of English consented that vernacular speaking is rampant in their schools, while (25%) said it is not rampant.

Owing to the fact that most of the teachers consented that vernacular speaking is rampant in their schools it was necessary to find out the methods they use to curb it. Mother tongue maintenance also featured highly in the English teachers' responses to factors leading to poor performance in English. Therefore, it was necessary to find out how this can be curbed because it seems to have an effect to the proper acquisition of English language in day

secondary schools. Most of the teachers as shown in table 1 indicated that it is treated as a punishable discipline case (24%). Another large group indicated that they use persuasive approach (20%). This is whereby students are encouraged to use English and sensitizing them on the importance of being fluent in English. The use of penalties (16%) that is buying of novels. Use of reminder tags (16%) like ‘use English’ fixed in communal places like dining halls and compounds was mentioned by equal number of teachers. The other factors mentioned are, having functional debating and journalism clubs (12%) and having proper and firm language policies (12%) whereby individuals who use vernacular in school are noted and punished by the school administration.

Table 1. Teachers’ Responses to Ways of Curbing Vernacular Speaking in Schools

<b>Ways of curbing</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentages (%)</b>
Punishable Discipline Case	6	24
Persuasive Approach	5	20
Use of Penalties	4	16
Debate and Journalism clubs	3	12
Reminder Tags	4	16
Language Policies	3	12
<b>Totals</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>

Just like Kaniu (2003) indicated, if the students used mother tongue in most of their interaction activities, then their opportunities to practice the use of English is limited. This idea seems to suggest that students’ acquisition of English language skills to some extent can be thwarted by the rampant use of vernacular in most of their interaction activities in schools.

### 1.7.2 Ways of Motivating Students to Excel in English

Spolky (1969) claims that there is correlation between motivation and proficiency and argues that successful learners are motivated and that success improves motivation. The findings from this study showed that most of the teachers (35%) rewarded performers only, as opposed to getting a way of motivating the whole class. Other teachers argued that they encourage students to speak in English (20%) and they also take them out on academic tours (20%). They also argued that they encourage students to finish their assignments promptly (25%). The analysis of the questionnaires administered indicated that students in day schools are not fully motivated to excel in the English language. So teachers should look for more appropriate ways of motivating. Table 2 presents data on ways of motivating students to excel in English.

Table 2. Ways of motivating students to excel in English language

<b>Ways of curbing</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentages (%)</b>
Rewards	7	35
Assignments	5	25
Speaking in English	4	20
Academic Tours	4	20
<b>Totals</b>	20	100

### 1.7.3 Pronunciation Errors Caused by Lack of Practice

In order to get a clear picture of the classroom situation of the day school learners, information was sought from English teachers on whether their students make pronunciation errors while reading aloud or participating in class discussions. The results indicated that (87.5%) of the students make pronunciation errors, when reading aloud in class, whereas a small percentage of just (12.5%) of the students do not often make these errors.

Further to this finding, the study sought information on the reaction of both the teacher and other learners to the pronunciation problem. The analysis indicated that while the teacher endeavored to correct the learner instantly and use the pronunciation mistake as an opportunity to teach oral skills, (75%) of the students treat it with indifference as well as making fun of it. This can result to serious setbacks like anxiety to the affected learner. Gardner and Maclyre (1991) argued that anxiety is typified by self-belittling feeling of apprehension, and even bodily responses such as a faster heartbeat; the anxious learner is also less willing to speak in class, or to engage target language speakers in formal interaction. It is in this light that teachers are supposed to treat this case with a lot of caution because laughing at the individual can cause t damage to learner's aspirations and self confidence leading to failure to acquire competence in the English language.

### 1.7.4 English Teachers' Comments on Students' Acquisition of English Language Skills

English teachers can easily tell how easily students acquire English language skills because they are with them in classrooms every day during English lessons and in other interactions. Therefore, the study sought information from the teachers on the manner in which their students received English language skills. Table 3 presents data on teachers' comments.

Table 3. Teachers' comments on Students' acquisition of English Language Skills

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Have Difficulties	4	16
Hampered by Poor Foundation	6	24
Dragged by lack of Practice	4	16
Require Drilling	5	20
Influenced by Mother tongue	6	24
<b>Total</b>	25	100

The study found out that most of the day school teachers (24%) affirmed that their students' acquisition of English language skills is greatly hampered by poor foundations right from primary school where much of the instruction is given in vernacular. Mother tongue influence and poor foundation were given as another source of slow acquisition of English language skills by students (24%). It was further noted that (20%) of the teachers' responses indicated that these students require thorough drilling in order to acquire the skills. The other response was that students acquire English language skills with difficulties (16%) and the acquisition is dragged by lack of practice (16%).

The composition test given to evaluate the oral and writing skills of students revealed that their English language skills are negatively influenced by mother tongue maintenance. Considering the errors identified from the students' composition, will give a clear explanation of what might have caused these errors.

### *1.8 Errors Identified in Students Written Test*

The following errors were identified in students' written test:

#### 1.8.1 Phonological Errors

The phonological errors identified are as a result of wrong pronunciation. Learners tend to write words the way they pronounce them, for example a word like 'academic' is wrongly spelt. It should be 'academic'. The other example is where students wrote 'leave' as 'live'. These errors could probably be attributed to failure by the students to constantly practice speaking in English.

#### 1.8.2 Morphological Errors

This was evident in the use of English plurals. Learners failed to learn that not all English words attain their plural forms by adding the morpheme -s at the end of a word, so they had words like 'advices' and 'furnitures'. This suggests that learners suffered faulty over-generalization and incomplete application of rules and also failed to learn conditions under which rules are applied.

#### 1.8.3 Syntactic Errors

The sample of the learner language revealed students' failure to conform to English syntax. This could probably be attributed to mother tongue influence. For instance, a construction like 'how is you?' possesses the errors of agreement which translates to syntactic errors due to the wrong use of auxiliary 'is' instead of 'are'. This aspect could further be explained by the following data from Ki-imenti where singular and plural agreement are different.

niatia	u-	uri?	(Mother tongue)		
how	sing. Agr.	Be		sing= singular	Agr.= agreement
how	are	you? Sing.	(English)		



niatia	bu-	ri?	(Mother tongue)		
how	plu. Agr.	Be		plu.=plural	Agr.=agreement
how	are	you? Plu.	(English)		

This illustration reveals that learners who write ‘how is you?’ have both inter-lingual and intralingual problems, in that since their mother tongue has both singular and plural way of greeting one or more people, they generalize that English must also have the same rule.

### *1.9 Conclusions and Recommendations*

Mother tongue interference impacts negatively on the acquisition of English language skills among day secondary school students. The findings from English language teachers in day secondary school affirmed that their students lack communicative command required in English language. Day secondary school students’ lack proper motivation to be able to learn English. Teachers mostly pay attention to students who perform well.

Since mother tongue maintenance hinders the advancement of English language among day secondary school students, administration should enforce rules to ensure that mother-tongue is not used in school. Schools should provide essential resources and facilities such libraries in order to provide an enabling environment for the acquisition of English in day schools. Schools should also ensure that all learners are motivated and a myriads of ways of motivation should be used.

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