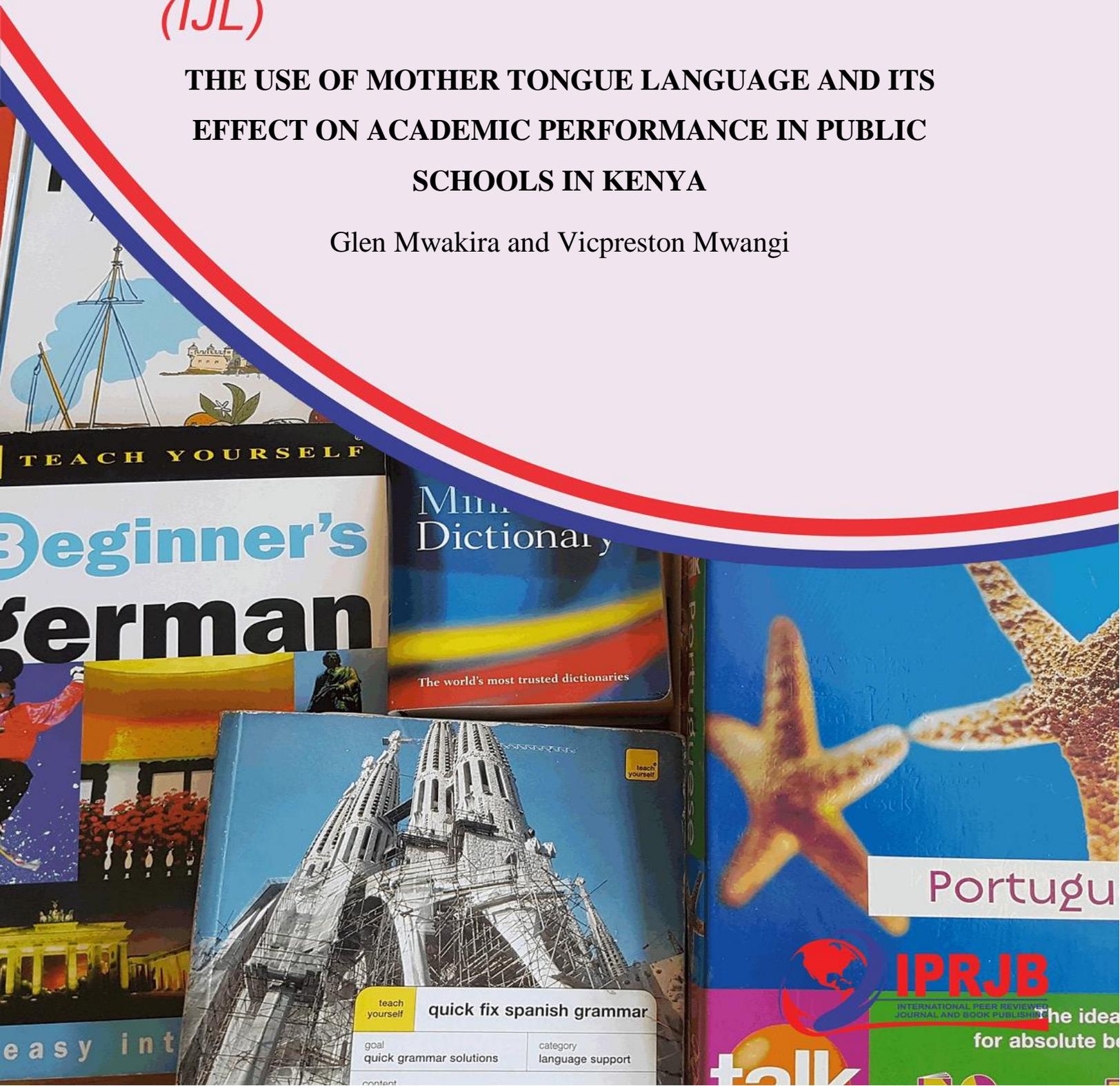


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## THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUE LANGUAGE AND ITS EFFECT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN KENYA

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# THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUE LANGUAGE AND ITS EFFECT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN KENYA

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to assess the use of mother tongue language and its effect on academic performance in public schools in Kenya.

**Methodology:** The study adopted a desktop literature review method (desk study). This involved an in-depth review of studies related to mother tongue language and its effect on academic performance in Kenya. The review on how to rethink and reorganize what is being done to solve mother tongue language challenges in Kenya by policymakers was done.

**Findings:** The findings show that language used by teachers influenced students' performance in English. Therefore, since the prevalence of switching language is high as indicated earlier, then this influences academic performance in secondary schools. Therefore, the findings imply that language used by teachers in classroom influences the academic performance. Speaking skills using language of instruction both by teachers and students have an impact on classroom participation and thus performance of English. Among other challenges identified is that use of mother tongue leads to inability to pronounce words. Use of mother tongue also leads to lack of confidence hence inhibit interaction. Students too noted that they were unable to understand questions written in English.

**Unique contribution to theory, policy, and practice:** Use of mother tongue is prevalent among students in secondary schools. Thus it was concluded that the prevalent use of mother tongue adversely influenced academic performance. The perception of teachers and students regarding influence of mother tongue on academic performance is equally important. Teachers and students hold the perception that use of mother tongue has a negative influence on academic performance. To curb use of mother tongue, proper measures need to be put in place. Language policies can reduce the use of mother tongue if they are implemented in the right way. An established mechanism that ensures students are rewarded and punished in equal measure can help to deter use of mother tongue and encourage use of English.

**Key words:** *mother tongue, academic performance, public schools, L1, L2*

## INTRODUCTION

Kenya is a linguistically heterogeneous and diverse country with many indigenous (mother tongues) and exogenous languages. Basically, Kenya has at least 42 indigenous languages. English is one of the exogenous languages. Other exogenous languages include: Arabic, French, German, Hindi, and Chinese while some of the indigenous languages include are Kalenjin, Dholuo, Kikuyu, Luhya, and Kisii among others. Use of English has a long history in Kenya. When Kenya attained self-rule in 1963, English was declared the official language (Republic of Kenya, 1964). It was to be used in all important government sectors including education. This policy re-emphasized what was already in place as a result of colonial language policy. At this particular point in time, the Ministry of Education took steps in line with language policy. In 1964, the Kenya Education Commission mounted a survey to establish the interests of the citizens with regard to language use. The findings revealed that most people wanted a trilingual approach to education (Ministry of Education, 2012). During this period, mother tongue was preferred for verbal communication especially in rural areas, while English and Kiswahili were preferred for education from lower primary to the university. Kiswahili was especially favored in education for purposes of national and regional unity. However, unlike English, mother tongue languages were not anchored into the school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Schools have been known to come up with internal language policies that aim at helping the students to be proficient both in spoken and written English and improve their performance in English (Ministry of Education, 2012). These policies are implemented by teachers who believe that if students speak in English, their written English will improve and thus their performance in English. Apparently, teachers and some parents believe that early exposure of learners to English will enhance the learning process since English is the medium of instruction in Kenyan schools; thus speaking in English is encouraged while use of mother tongue is discouraged (Kimani, 2012).

In a study done on factors influencing students' performance in English in KCSE in secondary schools in Meru North District, Kenya, Mwangi (2009) identified the problem that arises from having 100% of enrolment of students in their native district as is in the case of day district schools. This according to Mwangi (2009) contributes to poor performance in English as such students use their mother tongue during conversation. Parents should encourage their children to speak English while at home and school. Additionally, mother tongue as one of the challenges that influences performance of English.

Gacheche (2010) emphasizes the importance of English language acquisition as a stepping-stone for proficiency in other school subjects in the Kenyan education system and argues that use of mother tongue in secondary schools is a challenge in performance of English. In addition, Ouma (2010) researched on factors that affect performance of English in Gucha District, Kenya and found out that low proficiency and performance in English was associated to limited resources and students' use of mother tongue. He discourages the use of mother tongue in schools. Moreover, it is a requirement for students to pass in English language before entering the university since English is considered in various clusters that are a requirement for entry to various courses.

### **Problem statement**

There is a surge in expansion of secondary schools in the country (Kamano, 2011). Most of the emerging secondary schools are in the rural areas where learners prevalently use mother tongue at home and school. This prevalence of use of mother tongue especially in day secondary schools is an issue of concern since it is a challenge that influences the performance of English. The performance of English in the country has been declining. For instance, English was the subject with the highest decline in 2011 KCSE.

### **Objective of the study**

The aim of the study is to assess the use of mother tongue language and its effect on academic performance in public schools in Kenya.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Acculturation Theory**

This is an environmental-oriented theory proposed by John Schumann in 1978. It was used in 1980 in the field of Linguistics, precisely, Second Language Acquisition. It states that Second Language Acquisition is the result of acculturation, which he defines as “the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language (TL) group” (Schumann, 1978). The major claim of the theory is that acculturation, which is a cluster of social-psychological factors, is the major cause of Second Language Acquisition (Schumann, 1990). Schumann states that any learner can be placed along a continuum ranging from social-psychological distance to social-psychological proximity with the speakers of the target language. The degree of language acquisition, then, would correlate with the degree of the learner’s proximity to the target group. Thus, the acculturation theory argues that learners will be successful in Second Language Acquisition if there are fewer social and psychological distances between them and the speakers of the second language.

Some of the factors that account for the acquisition of second language according to the theory include: motivation and attitude of the learner, limited integration of cultural groups and how tight-knit the group is. This theory applied to this study because this study endeavored to find out how use of a language in a social context influences second language acquisition. The theory also indicates that learners will be successful in Second Language Acquisition if there are fewer social and psychological distances between them and the speakers of the second language. This study sought to establish the influence of use of mother tongue (which is a social factor) and the attitude towards use of mother tongue (a psychological factor) and how the distance created by use of mother tongue (Kikuyu) influences acquisition and thus performance in second language (English). Acculturation theory’s strength lies in the fact that it considers motivation to be instrumental and integrative. The motive for learning second language is important, however, the theory assumes that there will always be a group which is familiar with the second language; this is not always the case.

### **First Language Influence on Second Language**

There is a divergent view by scholars about use of mother tongue in education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report of 1953 articulated the significance of using mother tongue as language of instruction in early schooling. United

Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005) advocate for the use of mother tongue on psychological, sociological and educational grounds. Mother tongue education is supported by educationists due to its applicability to the cognitive development of a child. Learners have difficulties in developing cognitive skills when taught through the medium of a second language especially if it is not related to the learners' mother tongue (McNab, 1989). UNESCO advances the point of view that pupil's mother tongue is the best for expressional and understanding of concepts. This is compared to exogenous languages like English, which the pupil has to learn the subject before being instructed in the language. Educationists support the view that learners best learn from simple to complex, known to 18 unknown. The known language that a child encounters in his/her life is mother tongue.

Bartoo (2004) investigated on the acquisition of English syntax by Keiyo mother tongue speakers. In her study, she looked at the syntactic errors that result from First Language (L1) transfer in the process of acquiring English as a Second language (L2) by Keiyo speakers of English. She equally looked at the effects of the errors on performance of students. In her investigation, she found out that syntactic errors found in first language inhibit acquisition of English skills and thus performance of learners in English. This was important to this research since the researcher endeavored to analyze the influence of L1 (mother tongue) on L2 (English).

Krashen (1985) claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to form a mental block that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In addition, Krashen (1985) emphasis seems to be that classroom learning does not lead to fluent, native-like speech. This is important in this study since the researcher asked whether students who used mother tongue were punished and whether those who used English were rewarded. Furthermore, the researcher wanted to know whether the punishment deterred the students from using mother tongue.

Adebayo (2008) uses a survey design to examine the influence of mother tongue on performance of English language in Junior School Certificate Examination in Western Nigeria. He found that mother tongue influences the students' performance in English language in Junior School Certificate Examination in Western Nigeria. He recommends that English language should be used as a medium of communication within and outside the classroom and both teachers and students should endeavor to improve their proficiency level of the language which will eventually lead to improved performance. Adebayo's study does not explicitly indicate to what extent mother tongue influence the performance; this sought to establish what Adebayo (2008) failed to capture in his study by analyzing the extent to which mother tongue influences performance of English.

Kolawole (2002) also confirmed that students' performance in English language in secondary schools of Nigeria was very poor. He stressed further that the standard was poor due to a number reasons such as the use of mother tongue; some students do not understand the grammar because their teachers themselves do not know it and in most cases English language teachers in the senior primary and junior secondary schools resort to the use of mother tongue to teach (code switching); they use mother tongue to explain concepts. This might be true to Kenyan case especially in day schools where learners are drawn from a local context of a familiar native language.

Ayodele (1988) and Kolawole (2002) recommend that pupils should have exposure to the English language quite early in primary school irrespective of the perceived advantages of mother tongue. These scholars emphasize on firm foundation in English language for better performance in the subject in future and argue that a solid foundation in English essentially provides students with fundamental skills of English language.

Njoroge (1987) studied the acquisition of Six Morphosyntactic Structures of English by Kenyan School Children and looked at how First Language (L1) of students from different mother tongues in Kenya interfered and affected learning of English. He found out that children's First Language (L1) usually interferes with acquisition of Second Language (L2) skills. Njoroge's study is important to this research in that it is looking at errors that are as a result of mother tongue influence on the performance of English.

Wagikondi (2004) did an investigation into factors contributing to poor achievement in English in Kirinyaga District, Kenya and identified that when language of communication at home and school is mother tongue, then acquisition of English skills is inhibited and thus the performance of English is affected. Wagikondi (2004) also recommends that there is need to carry out a research to investigate the influence of mother tongue on student's performance in English.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a desktop literature review method (desk study). This involved an in-depth review of studies related to mother tongue language and its effect on academic performance in Kenya. The research involved literature search and paper review of information on mother tongue language and academic performance with respect to the value of archival materials (Creswell, 2014). This article reviewed recorded sources to present the current state of mother tongue language in Kenya. In line with Creswell's assertion that observations are important for obtaining first-hand knowledge that enriches analysis results, under different themes, the study revealed observations were made from the recorded sources. Where appropriate, the review on how to rethink and reorganize what is being done to solve mother tongue language challenges in Kenya by policymakers was done.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings show that language used by teachers influenced students' performance in English. Therefore, since the prevalence of switching language is high as indicated earlier, then this influences academic performance in secondary schools. Kolawole (2002) has a similar view when he talks about the language that teachers use and argues that some students do not understand grammar because their teachers themselves do not know it and in most cases English language teachers in the senior primary and junior secondary schools resort to the use of mother tongue to teach (code switching); this leads to poor performance of English. Therefore, the findings imply that language used by teachers in classroom influences the academic performance.

These findings show that academic performance is influenced when teachers use mother tongue. This agrees with Setati et al (2002) who argues that when a teacher uses mother tongue or code switches in class the student may understand or access meaning at the expense of linguistic grammatical concepts, thus influencing performance of English. Teachers' use of mother tongue leads to persistence of errors that come from first language (mother tongue) shown through direct

translation; this has adverse influences academic performance. It can therefore be concluded that students perceive that use of English in conversations by teachers eventually influences the performance in English. Kamano (2011) studied the influence of instructional language choice on secondary school students on academic performance in Kikuyu District, Kenya and concurs that speaking skills using language of instruction both by teachers and students have an impact on classroom participation and thus performance of English.

Use of mother tongue has a negative influence on academic performance. Hasindu (2011) argues that poor performance in English is as a result of students' use of mother tongue during conversation. Thus, the poor performance of English in secondary schools can be attributed to high prevalence of use of mother tongue. Use of English in conversations enhance performance of English while use of mother tongue in conversations negatively influences performance of English in secondary schools. These findings concur with Mwangi (2009) who argues that poor performance in English is as a result of students using their mother tongue during conversations; he discourages use of mother tongue and encourages use of English in conversations. Thus secondary schools have to encourage the use of English in their schools.

Among other challenges identified is that use of mother tongue leads to inability to pronounce words. Use of mother tongue also leads to lack of confidence hence inhibit interaction. Students too noted that they were unable to understand questions written in English. Another challenge identified is that students had a problem expressing themselves and had poor public speaking skills. This also contributed to lack of self-confidence. Furthermore, students lacked understanding of contextual use of English language. Findings show that use of mother tongue hinders critical as well as creative thinking in English. The use of mother tongue as an inhibitor to fluency in speaking. Findings reveal that use of mother tongue thwarted students' interpretation of questions correctly during classroom sessions forcing teachers to switch languages.

## **CONCLUSION**

Students and teachers code switched for various reasons. Use of mother tongue is prevalent among students in secondary schools. Thus it was concluded that the prevalent use of mother tongue adversely influenced academic performance. The perception of teachers and students regarding influence of mother tongue on academic performance is equally important. Teachers and students hold the perception that use of mother tongue has a negative influence on academic performance. The perception that use of mother tongue influence negatively academic performance is the general conclusion drawn from the research.

To curb use of mother tongue, proper measures need to be put in place. Language policies can reduce the use of mother tongue if they are implemented in the right way. An established mechanism that ensures students are rewarded and punished in equal measure can help to deter use of mother tongue and encourage use of English. It was thus concluded that teachers reward for students who use English and punishment for those who use mother tongue is important to encourage students to converse in English and deter those who intend to converse in mother tongue. Challenges that are as a result of use of mother tongue are varied. Use of mother tongue brings about challenge in pronunciation and writing in English. Students also exhibit a challenge of lack of confidence and poor communication skills as a result of use of mother tongue. The challenges that can arise can be eliminated by provision of a conducive environment for learners

to use English. Therefore, it was deduced that use of mother tongue influences writing and pronunciation of English words and thus performance of English. Finally, strategies to be used to improve the performance of English are of importance. Consequently, the general conclusion was that teachers have to provide students with an environment to cultivate their reading skills and spoken English. It was also deduced that using English as the language of interaction through debates and discussions in class was important.

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