

The Role of Foreign and Indigenous Languages in Primary Schools: The case of Kenya

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Abstract

This article investigates the use of English and other African languages in Kenyan primary schools. English is a foreign language to the majority of Kenyans, although there are some who claim that it is a Kenyan language. English is however the official language of Kenya and, in terms of policy, the medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards. Kiswahili, an indigenous language, is the national language in Kenya which is taught and examined as a compulsory subject from Grade 1 up to Grade 12. Kiswahili is also a subject at Kenyan universities. The other indigenous languages are only taught up to Grade 3 and only in rural schools. While the situation described above is the language policy in schools, the practice differs from the policy. Based on a comprehensive study conducted in 2006, this paper shows how English and the indigenous languages complement each other to facilitate teaching and learning in primary schools. It is shown that Mathematics and Science lessons in Grade 4 (when English becomes the medium of instruction) are conducted in bilingual English-Kiswahili codes switching and in trilingual English-Kiswahili-native language code switching in urban schools and peri-urban and rural schools, respectively.

Keywords: Medium of instruction, Kiswahili, English, mother tongue, primary school, urban, peri-urban.

Full text: <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/splp/article/view/124359>