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Barriers to L1 Proficiency in Multilingual Educational Settings: A Case of Lower Primary School Pupils in Meru Central District, Kenya

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Abstract
This article is based on findings from a larger study conducted to assess levels of Kimeru proficiency among primary school pupils in Meru Central District. The study was a descriptive survey conducted in five primary schools. The sample consisted of thirty class four pupils from public primary schools and twenty lower primary school teachers. The research instruments employed were Kimeru proficiency tests, focused group discussions and questionnaires. Data was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. From the study it was found out that several barriers such as motivation to learn L1, education policy, exposure to written materials and community influence contribute to low levels of Kimeru proficiency among primary school pupils. Given the role of L1 in learning other languages, the pupils were likely to have difficulties learning English and accessing the curriculum.

Key words: Proficiency, Bilingualism, Barriers, Mother tongue.

Introduction
A close relationship is seen to exist not only between language and communication but also between language and thought. Proficiency in a language therefore, helps in clear thought processes, decision making and critical thinking (Crystal 1994). In Kenya however, a big portion of Kenyan population does not manage to attain meaningful proficiency levels through the school system either in L1 or in English (Muthwii 2004). Indigenous languages like Kimeru are neglected in Kenya by not being given status in any major public domain. Consequently, many are not able to participate meaningfully in important discourses, processes and thoughts. The child's first language, knowledge and skill are not developed or nurtured in Kenyan schools because the L1 is discouraged in schools in the upper primary classes.

According to Muthwii (2002), it could be argued that the issue of language use in general and language in education in particular, inculcates in children the shallow, poorly considered idea that MT languages are inferior to English. The children therefore imagine that there is no education of any significance that can come through the MT and fail to appreciate its potential in many ways. The pupils' interest in MT therefore, remains perfunctory, their knowledge of it, superficial and stunted. This is contrary to findings of international research that show bilingual education starting in learners' mother tongue can provide many pedagogical and linguistic advantages (Baker 2000, Cummins 2000).

Cummins (2000), states that conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in other languages comprehensible. For example, if a child understands the concept of justice or honesty in one language all she has to do is acquire the label for these terms in English. However, in multilingual settings, languages do not have equal status. The more prestigious languages tend to have positive social economic connotations while the minority languages have low social economic status and seem to imply lack of academic achievement and sophistication. This attitude fails to appreciate that language is not only an instrument of communication of messages but also a medium of transmission of the cultural norms and values of a people. When children learn to read and write in the majority language only, then the MT must almost inevitably be considered a second rate means of communication. The language policy in Kenya encompasses a bilingual approach in education where the child's mother tongue (or the language of catchment area) is

used as the language of instruction in lower primary classes while English and Kiswahili are taught as subjects (Gachathi 1976). In the upper classes, English takes over as the language of instruction while Kiswahili is taught as a subject. Mother tongue is dropped from the school system and MT is expected to be acquired at home and in the neighborhood. Languages which are used for literacy only at the lower primary schools in one part of the country are faced with the possibility of becoming functionally extinct as many of them are slowly but surely driven closer to extinction (Mbaabu 1996). The African culture, the wisdom, philosophy and the orature they embody is fast disappearing.

According to KIE syllabus (2002), mother tongue is the first language a child is exposed to or the language of the School's catchment area. This is the language in which children first learn to express their thoughts and develop relationships with their immediate social environment. Their experience in education therefore, should provide for their mother tongue to enable them to learn and understand the values and concerns of society. The school should attempt to amplify rather than replace these experiences.

Observations have been made about the inability of pupils in Kenya primary school classes to read in English (Maina 1991) and poor reading ability among school leavers (Kirigia 1995, Chege 1999). The inability of the pupils to read in English in their early years is attributed to a number of factors (Mberia 2002). Among these factors is that first language literacy skills are not yet fully developed and therefore the consequent lack of background skills to bring to the task of learning to read English as a second language. It is out of this concern that the study sought to assess the levels of Kimeru proficiency among primary school pupils in Meru central district and the factors contributing to these proficiency levels. This article focuses on barriers identified. Since proficiency in a language is tied to its vitality and survival, a study of Kimeru proficiency and the barriers affecting it may help to understand its status. In addition, given that language is tied to identity and culture, the study may help in formulation of policies on development, promotion and maintenance of Kimeru and other indigenous languages in Kenya.

Theoretical Issues
The theoretical framework which informed and framed the study emerged from Cummins Linguistic Proficiency Theory, the psychological view of literacy and the sociological theory of language planning. Cummins proposes a minimum threshold of first language cognitive/academic development necessary for success in second language learning. Cummins also suggests that if the threshold of cognitive proficiency is not achieved, the learner may have difficulties achieving bilingual proficiency. Therefore, continued development in the first language would help second language learners in their learning of the second language. It is important that new input is connected to the learners' previous knowledge, including linguistic, conceptual and learned knowledge. So the continued support of the first language whilst learning the second language would be beneficial for cognitive development as well as for other socio-cultural reasons.
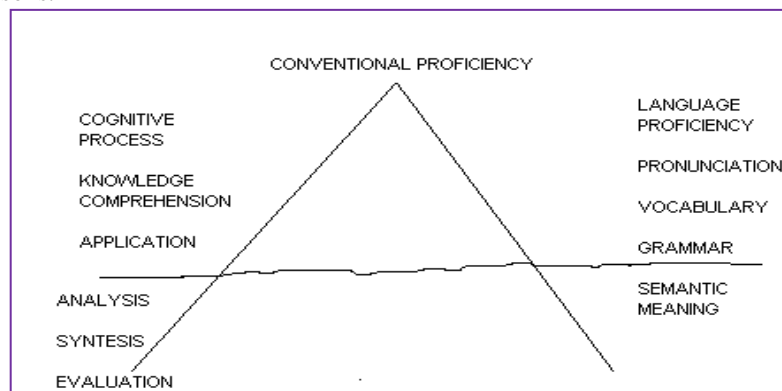

Fig 1. BICS/CALP (Cummins 1984)

According to Cummins linguistic interdependence principle: *to the extent that instruction is effective in promoting proficiency in Lx transfer of this proficiency to Ly will occur provided there is adequate exposure to Ly (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn Ly (* Cummins 1981,p.29). According to this principle, pupils who have not acquired desired proficiency levels in their MT have limited background skills to bring to the task of learning a second language. A minimum threshold needs to be developed in L1 if there are to be any benefits from bilingualism (Cummins 2000). If there is low level of proficiency in both languages there may be negative consequences. Sometimes, this has been referred as semi-lingualism where the learner is neither proficient in L1 or English. This may be the case in Kenya where many primary school pupils are neither proficient in L1 or English. This may results to subtractive bilingualism. Subtractive bilingualism arrives out of a situation where the second language is acquired without accommodating the linguistic skills that have been developed in the first language. In this model, the learners L1 skills are replaced by L2 thereby placing linguistic and cultural systems in conflict instead of complementing one another (McLaughlin, 1990). On the other hand, under the psychological view, literacy is seen as the possession of psycholinguistic skills that enable one to handle symbolic information. Such skills include: reading, writing, communication skills, and what wells (1989), has called literate thinking skills which refer to using language deliberately as a tool for thinking.

Method
The data for the study was obtained by administering Kimeru proficiency tests to pupils to obtain data on writing, reading and speaking proficiency. Questionnaires were administered to teachers to collect data on factors influencing Kimeru proficiency, the effect of Kimeru proficiency on language use and teachers' views on MT. Views from pupils on their MT and their language practices were obtained through focused group discussions.

Area of Study
The study was conducted in Meru Central District of Eastern Province in Kenya. The residents of this area are native Kimeru speakers of Imenti dialect. Imenti dialect is considered the standard for the entire Meru region. It is the dialect used for Bible translation for the larger Meru community and used as a medium of instruction in the formative years of schooling in the region (Mathooko 2005, Mbaabu 1996).

Target Population
The target population for the study was twenty teachers from both private and public primary schools and thirty standard four pupils from public primary schools in Meru Central District. Milroy (1987) observes that large samples are not necessary for linguistic surveys because they tend to be redundant, bringing data handling problems with diminishing analytical returns.

Sampling Procedures
The study used purposive sampling procedure whose underlying principle involves identifying in advance the type of speakers to be studied and then seeking the quota of the speakers who fit the specified categories. In this study, Primary schools in Meru Central district were arranged in groups of public and private schools. Three public primary schools which teach Kimeru in lower classes were purposively picked while two were picked among private schools. In each public school selected, four teachers handling lower classes were involved and all class four pupils while four teachers were sampled from each private school. Later, the compositions from each public school were arranged according to sex of the pupils, five girls and five boys were randomly picked for further assessment in speaking, reading and focused group discussion.

Research Instruments
The research instruments used in the study were questionnaires for teachers, Kimeru proficiency tests and focused group discussions for pupils. Proficiency tests were given as an instrument to assess proficiency levels in different skills while the questionnaire was administered to teachers as a complementary data collection instrument to find out barriers to L1 profficiency. To obtain data, Kimeru proficiency tests were administered to class four pupils to assess their writing, reading and speaking skills in Kimeru. The tests were administered to a sample of thirty standard four pupils from three public primary schools in Meru Central District. Questionnaires were administered to teachers to collect data on factors influencing Kimeru proficiency, the effect of Kimeru proficiency on language use and teachers' views on MT. Views from pupils on their MT and their language practices were obtained through focused group discussions.

Validity and Reliability.
Palton (2001), states that validity and reliability are two factors which any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analyzing results and judging the quality of the study. A language test is said to have content validity if its content constitutes a sample of language skills and structures it is concerned with. To ensure validity in the Kimeru proficiency tests, the researcher obtained the skills and linguistic structures that are meant to be covered in MT according to KIE (2002) syllabus. This provided the basis for selection of items to be included in the tests and aided in developing norms for different language skills.To enhance validity of the questionnaire and focused group discussions, the researcher sought advice from the supervisors and peers on validity and relevance of the questions to the topic of the study. Comments and suggestions raised by lecturers during the proposal presentation were also incorporated in formulating the final questionnaire. A test is said to be reliable if it measures consistently what it is meant to measure. Reliability of a test ensures that the scores obtained by any given candidate in any given test are not spurious (Ochieng, 2003). In this study, proficiency tests were given to a small group of pupils who were not part of the study for pre-testing. The responses elicited helped the researcher to restructure the questions to enhance reliability.

Data Analysis
The collected data was coded and categorized manually by the researcher. The coding was according to Kimeru proficiency test results and questionnaire feedback. Data was then captured and analyzed using the statistical package for social science (SPSS) version of 10.0 programs. Finally, the researcher presented and described data using tables, frequencies, percentages and charts.

Findings
Kimeru Proficiency Levels among Primary School Pupils.
Performance in the proficiency tests was analyzed using percentage intervals and the scores were graded according to three levels of competence as proposed by Groenewegan (2008) in Table 1.

Table 1: Competence Levels and Marks in Percentages.

Competence level	Marks in percentage
Below minimum competence level	49 % and below
Minimum competence level	50-69 %
Desired competence level	70 % and above

Source: Benchmarks for English Language Education, Groenewegan (2008).

From the writing test given, 80 percent of the pupils failed to achieve the minimum competence level, 10 percent demonstrated minimum competence level while only 10 percent had achieved the desired competence level. From the Kimeru reading test given, 50 percent of pupils failed to demonstrate minimum competence level, 37 percent attained minimum competence level while only 13 percent had desired competence level. Finally, from the Kimeru speaking proficiency test, 90 percent of the pupils had attained minimum competence level, 10 percent demonstrated desired level while only 3 percent had not attained minimum level.

Barriers Influencing Kimeru Proficiency
In order to identify factors influencing Kimeru proficiency among primary school pupils in Meru Central District, questionnaires were administered as a complementary data collection instrument. The respondents were lower primary schools teachers in Meru Central District sampled from five schools. When asked to comment on Kimeru proficiency levels among standard four pupils, 75 percent said they were average, 15 percent said they were below average while 10 percent said they were average. This meant that many teachers viewed their pupils as possessing minimum Kimeru proficiency skills.

Table 2: Teachers' Opinion on Kimeru Proficiency among Standard Four Pupils.

	Frequency	percent
Below average	3	15%
Average	15	75%
Above average	62	10%
Total	20	100%

Teachers' Views on Kimeru
The researcher sought teachers' opinion on whether Kimeru should be taught and why. 65 percent of the respondents supported the teaching of Kimeru while 35% opposed it. The respondents gave several factors for and against the teaching of Kimerua as shown table 4.3 and 4. 4. Below

Table 3: Reasons for Teaching Kimeru.

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
It's local language/Mother tongue	12	60%
Supports other languages	04	20%
Preserve culture/heritage	05	25%
Provides background for education	11	55%
Enables effective communication	2	10%
It's government policy	1	5%

Table 4. Factors Influencing Kimeru Proficiency.

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Pupils' background	11	55%
Community/peers influence	04	20%
Language used by teacher	8	40%
Education policy	6	30%
Exposure to written materials	5	25%
Motivation	6	30%

When asked to identify factors influencing Kimeru proficiency (mastery) among pupils, teachers identified several factors as shown in graph below. **Graph1:** Shows Factors Influencing Kimeru Proficiency Identified By Teachers.
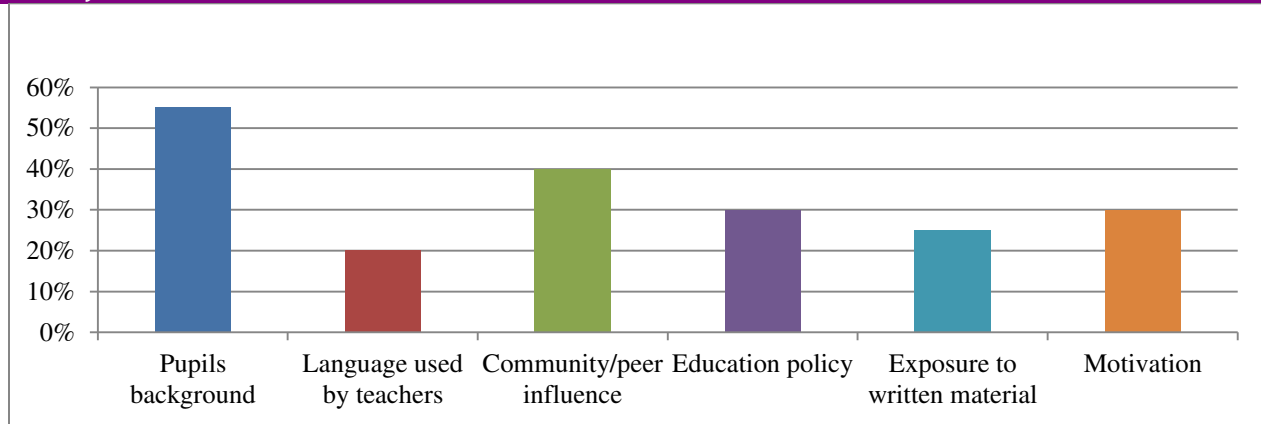
Fig 2: Factors Influencing Kimeru Proficiency Identified By Teachers.

Discussion

According to Schmid (2002), first language acquisition is mediated by a number of external factors such as exposure and use, attitude and motivation. In the absence of favourable factors, L1 proficiency and acquisition is stunted. This seems to be the case in Meru Central where Kimeru was seen as an inferior language. Languages which are used for literacy only at the lower primary school in one part of the country are faced with the possibility of becoming functionally extinct as many of them are slowly but surely driven closer to extinction (Mbaabu 1996). The African culture, the wisdom, philosophy and orature they embody is fast disappearing.

Lambert (1980) observes that many ethnic minority groups are forced to shift from their ethnic languages towards a national language by national education policies and various social pressures. The MT language as a non-prestigious language cannot be maintained adequately and it may be subtracted from bilingual proficiency. If the MT is spoken in fewer domains its value decreases. If the shift is towards the majority language, this language seems to conquer domain after domain via the intermediate stage of bilingual language use. This in turn will lessen the motivation for younger people to learn it.

McLaughlin (1985) noted that the major problem of the transitional model of bilingual education is that there is a tendency to emphasize English at the expense of the first language. Instead of using cognitive and linguistic development in the first language such as Kimeru for later development in the second language, many programmes in this bilingual model give superficial attention to mother tongue instruction. Sometimes children are exited into L2 medium of instruction before they have mastered enough of the L1 to enable them access the curriculum. This may account for the poor performance in English proficiency tests done among primary school pupils (UNESCO IIEP, 2001). According to Adegbija (2001), a positive attitude stake in a language is a dominant factor in its maintenance. Conversely, negative attitude with respect to a particular language constitutes the precipitator of language shift. This may be indicated by the child's proficiency levels in the language.

 From the responses given by many teachers who were sampled, it was evident that many were ignorant on the importance of Kimeru literacy to learning other languages. It was evident that many teachers did not see any positive connection between the mastery of literacy skills in Kimeru and the learning of English.In most of the schools sampled many teachers reported that they mixed languages when teaching lower classes. This therefore implies that the policy on LOI is not fully implemented. At the same time, given the role of English as the official language and language of instruction associated with success, power, prestige, progress and achievement, Kimeru is neglected and there is little motivation to learn it. However, given that the first language enhances meta-linguistic skills and development of proficiency in the second language, there is needed to develop sufficient Kimeru literacy skills in the early years of schooling.

Conclusion

From the study, it emerges that there are low levels of Kimeru proficiency among primary schools pupils in Meru Central District precipitated by several barriers. To a large degree, the objectives set for MT education in lower primary schools are not attained. Standard four pupils had not developed sufficient literacy skills in Kimeru. This may partly be attributed to the transitional model of bilingualism in Kenya's education system where pupils learn in their mother tongue in class 1-3 and switch to English in upper classes. As many pupils and teachers pointed out there was little motivation to learn Kimeru because it's not taught after lower primary school. Moreover, there are many barriers to L1 proficiency identified in the study. The respondents identified several factors influencing Kimeru proficiency. The factors identified included; pupils background, language used by teachers, language used with peer and the community, language policy in Kenya's education system, exposure to written materials and motivation. Furthermore, during focused group discussions the pupils pointed out that their proficiency especially in writing and reading Kimeru is influenced by several factors. These included: Kimeru is only taught in lower primary classes, it is not examined at K.C.P.E, it is not commonly

used in writing and that they are discouraged from speaking Kimeru in upper classes. Therefore, Majority of the pupils saw no need for being proficient in Kimeru and preferred English because it is a gateway for success and subsequent employment opportunities. The pupils said that learning English would help them pass examinations while Kimeru was neither taught after lower classes nor examined.

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