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BILINGUALISM AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MBEYA CITY COUNCIL, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of bilingualism on English language learning among secondary students in Mbeya City Council, Tanzania. The study was guided by Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory and employed a qualitative approach using a case study design. Thirty-five participants, comprising head teachers, academic masters and mistresses, English language teachers and students, participated. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations and documentary review and were analysed thematically. Findings showed that bilingualism had both supportive and constraining effects on English language learning. Kiswahili and indigenous languages such as Nyakyusa supported students' comprehension of difficult concepts, vocabulary development, classroom participation and confidence. Teachers strategically used code-switching, translation and scaffolding to connect students' existing linguistic knowledge with new English concepts. Interactive strategies, including group discussions, debates, presentations, role plays and peer learning, also created opportunities for English practice. However, excessive reliance on Kiswahili and indigenous languages reduced students' exposure to English, particularly outside the classroom. Other challenges included fear of making mistakes, limited opportunities for authentic English communication, inadequate professional development, shortages of teaching and learning resources, large classes, limited instructional time and examination-oriented teaching. The study concludes that bilingualism should not be treated solely as a barrier to English learning; rather, learners' existing languages should be strategically used as pedagogical resources while ensuring sustained opportunities to practise English. The study recommends strengthening bilingual and communicative language pedagogy, providing continuous professional development and

adequate language-learning resources, and establishing English clubs, debates, drama, presentations and reading activities to enhance English use.

KEYWORDS: Bilingualism, English language learning, Code-switching, Multilingualism, Kiswahili, Secondary Schools.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Language is a fundamental medium through which learners acquire knowledge, communicate ideas, participate in classroom activities and develop academic competencies. In multilingual societies, learners enter formal education with linguistic knowledge acquired from their families and communities, and such knowledge can influence the way they acquire additional languages. Bilingualism is therefore an important consideration in education because learners may draw upon more than one language when constructing meaning and interacting with teachers and peers. Cummins (2017) argues that linguistic knowledge and cognitive skills developed through one language can support the acquisition of another language, suggesting that learners' existing linguistic resources can be valuable in additional-language learning.

The issue of bilingualism is particularly important in Tanzania because the education system operates within a multilingual environment involving Kiswahili, English and numerous indigenous languages. Kiswahili is widely used in everyday communication and is dominant in primary education, while English has historically been used extensively in secondary education and higher levels of learning. This creates a substantial linguistic transition for learners moving from primary to secondary education. Adamson (2022) reports that Tanzanian learners experience a shift from seven years of primary schooling in which Kiswahili is predominantly used to secondary schooling in which English becomes the principal language of instruction, creating challenges for students who have limited opportunities to use English outside school.

The transition from Kiswahili to English can influence students' comprehension, classroom participation and academic performance. When learners have insufficient proficiency in the language of instruction, they may understand concepts less effectively and become less willing to participate in classroom discussions. Nzingula (2005) found that the use of English as the medium of instruction created difficulties for teaching and learning in Tanzanian secondary schools, while code-switching from English to Kiswahili helped students

understand lessons. Similarly, Vuzo (2010) found that English-Kiswahili code-switching was widely used by teachers and learners as a coping strategy for achieving meaningful classroom interaction.

The multilingual situation becomes even more complex because many Tanzanian learners use indigenous languages within their families and local communities. Thus, students may move between an indigenous language, Kiswahili and English depending on the context in which communication occurs. Mkilifi (2008) describes Tanzania as a context of triglossia in which vernacular languages, Kiswahili and English have overlapping but different social and educational functions. This multilingual environment means that students' English learning cannot be fully understood without considering the other languages that form part of their everyday linguistic experiences.

Within such an environment, bilingualism can provide important resources for English learning. Learners can use previously acquired vocabulary, concepts, communication skills and learning strategies as foundations for understanding English. Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory provides a useful explanation for this process because it proposes that cognitive and academic competencies developed through one language can contribute to the acquisition of another language (Cummins, 2017). However, the benefits of bilingualism depend on how the different languages are used. Strategic use of familiar languages may support comprehension, whereas excessive dependence on Kiswahili may reduce learners' opportunities to practise English. Adamson (2022) similarly found that the dominance of Kiswahili in learners' everyday environments limited opportunities for English practice.

Mbeya City Council provides an important context for investigating these issues because students interact within a multilingual environment involving Kiswahili, English and indigenous languages. The present study therefore examined how students' use of Kiswahili and indigenous languages influenced English language learning, the strategies teachers used to support English learning, and the challenges students encountered in developing English proficiency. The study contributes to the understanding of bilingual English language learning within the Tanzanian secondary-school context.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the importance of English in secondary education, many Tanzanian students experience difficulties in developing adequate English language proficiency. The problem is

partly associated with the linguistic transition from Kiswahili-dominated primary education to English-medium secondary education. Students may have studied most subjects in Kiswahili during primary school and subsequently be required to learn through English at secondary level. Adamson (2022) notes that the limited English environment outside school can make it difficult for students to obtain sufficient opportunities to practise English.

Although bilingualism can create challenges, the presence of Kiswahili and indigenous languages should not automatically be regarded as a barrier to English learning. Familiar languages can help learners understand difficult concepts, clarify vocabulary and participate in classroom interaction. Nzingula (2005) found that code-switching between English and Kiswahili enabled students to understand lessons more effectively, while Vuzo (2010) reported that code-switching was regarded by stakeholders as a natural and necessary classroom practice in Tanzanian secondary schools.

The problem arises when the use of familiar languages reduces opportunities for learners to use English. While code-switching can facilitate immediate comprehension, students also need sufficient exposure to English to develop vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and communicative confidence. Martine (2018) specifically investigated the relationship between code-switching and English proficiency among secondary-school students in Tanzania, demonstrating the importance of examining not only whether code-switching occurs but also how it influences English language development.

Consequently, there was a need to investigate the influence of bilingualism on English language learning in secondary schools in Mbeya City Council. The study focused on the contribution of Kiswahili and indigenous languages, teachers' strategies for supporting bilingual learners, and challenges affecting students' English language proficiency. The study was therefore intended to provide evidence that could inform classroom practices and approaches to English language teaching in multilingual Tanzanian secondary schools.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Bilingualism and English Language Learning

Bilingualism can influence additional-language learning through both linguistic and cognitive processes. Learners do not necessarily approach a new language without prior knowledge; instead, they bring existing vocabulary, conceptual understanding, communication strategies and learning experiences into the classroom. Cummins (2017) argues that competencies

developed in one language can support the development of another language, particularly where learners are provided with opportunities to transfer knowledge across languages. This perspective suggests that Kiswahili and indigenous languages can provide foundations upon which English language learning can be constructed.

Evidence from Tanzania supports the importance of examining bilingual practices rather than assuming that English-only instruction is always the most effective approach. Vuzo (2010) found that teachers and students in Tanzanian secondary schools frequently used English-Kiswahili code-switching as a coping strategy to overcome communication difficulties and facilitate meaningful learning. Similarly, Nzingula (2005) found that switching from English to Kiswahili helped students understand classroom lessons, demonstrating the potential pedagogical value of familiar languages.

However, bilingual practices can also create challenges for English language development. When students predominantly communicate in Kiswahili or indigenous languages, their opportunities to practise English may be limited. Adamson (2022) found that the prevalence of Kiswahili in students' everyday lives meant that they had limited opportunities to practise English outside school. Therefore, although familiar languages can facilitate comprehension, learners require adequate opportunities to use English if they are to develop communicative proficiency.

The relationship between bilingualism and English learning is also influenced by language interference. Differences between Kiswahili, indigenous languages and English may result in difficulties with pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction. Kanijo (2018), for example, examined Swahili-English bilinguals in Tanzania and identified grammatical errors associated with differences between the linguistic structures of the two languages. Such findings demonstrate that bilingualism can provide useful linguistic resources while simultaneously creating possibilities for cross-linguistic interference.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory. The theory proposes that proficiency and cognitive skills developed through one language can provide a foundation for learning an additional language (Cummins, 2017). The theory was relevant because students participating in the study possessed linguistic knowledge in Kiswahili and indigenous languages before and alongside their learning of English. Their existing languages

could therefore function as resources for understanding new English concepts and developing academic competencies.

The theory further helps explain why the findings showed both positive and negative effects of bilingualism. On the positive side, learners could use their knowledge of Kiswahili and indigenous languages to understand concepts and participate in classroom activities. On the negative side, differences between languages could contribute to errors and interference. Kanijo (2018) similarly demonstrates that some errors among Swahili-English bilinguals arise from differences between the linguistic systems of the languages involved.

The study also drew on the concept of scaffolding to explain how teachers supported learners with varying levels of English proficiency. Teachers could use Kiswahili or indigenous languages to explain difficult concepts and subsequently encourage learners to express the same ideas in English. Such practices are consistent with the view that learners can benefit from temporary support before gradually developing greater independence in the target language.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach because it sought to obtain detailed information about participants' experiences, perceptions and practices concerning bilingualism and English language learning. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on understanding how languages were used within actual classroom and school environments rather than merely measuring students' language proficiency numerically. The study employed a case study design to enable an in-depth examination of bilingual English language learning in selected public secondary schools in Mbeya City Council.

The study involved 35 participants comprising head teachers, academic masters/mistresses, English language teachers and students. The inclusion of different participant categories enabled the study to obtain perspectives from both providers and recipients of English language instruction. Similar qualitative research on code-switching in Tanzanian secondary schools has demonstrated the value of obtaining information from teachers, students and school administrators when examining multilingual classroom practices (Eliakimu, 2015).

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations and documentary review. These methods enabled the researcher to obtain participants' views while also examining actual classroom language practices. The use of observation was particularly important because participants' descriptions of language use could be compared with what occurred during classroom teaching. Previous Tanzanian research on code-switching has similarly used interviews, observations and documentary analysis to examine language practices in secondary schools (Vuzo, 2010).

The qualitative data were analysed thematically. Information obtained from interviews, focus group discussions, observations and documents was organised according to recurring themes and patterns related to the three research objectives. The analysis focused on the influence of Kiswahili and indigenous languages, strategies used by teachers, and challenges affecting English language proficiency. The findings were then interpreted in relation to Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Theory and relevant empirical literature.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Influence of Kiswahili and Indigenous Languages on English Language Learning

The findings revealed that Kiswahili had a significant supportive role in students' English language learning. Teachers used Kiswahili to explain difficult English vocabulary, clarify unfamiliar concepts and ensure that students understood lesson content. Students also reported that explanations provided in Kiswahili helped them connect new English concepts with knowledge they had already acquired. This finding supports Cummins' (2017) argument that knowledge and cognitive competencies developed through one language can facilitate additional-language learning.

The supportive role of Kiswahili is also consistent with evidence from Tanzanian secondary schools. Nzingula (2005) found that code-switching from English to Kiswahili helped students understand lessons, while Vuzo (2010) reported that stakeholders considered English-Kiswahili code-switching a common coping strategy for meaningful teaching and learning. The findings of the present study therefore reinforce the argument that familiar languages can function as pedagogical resources when they are used purposefully.

However, the study also found that excessive reliance on Kiswahili could reduce opportunities for English practice. Students primarily used Kiswahili and indigenous languages in their everyday communication, while English was more strongly associated with

formal classroom activities. This finding agrees with Adamson (2022), who found that the dominance of Kiswahili in students' lives limited opportunities to practise English outside school. The implication is that teachers need to strike an appropriate balance between using familiar languages for comprehension and maintaining sufficient English exposure for language development.

Indigenous languages also influenced English learning. Students' knowledge of languages such as Nyakyusa and other local languages provided them with established communication skills and cultural knowledge that could support learning. However, linguistic differences between indigenous languages and English sometimes contributed to pronunciation and grammatical difficulties. The existence of multiple linguistic systems is consistent with Mkilifi's (2008) description of Tanzania as a triglossic environment in which vernacular languages, Kiswahili and English perform different but interconnected social functions.

The findings therefore suggest that bilingualism should not be conceptualised simply as a problem in English language learning. Instead, learners' existing languages can be treated as linguistic resources that support comprehension and participation. Nevertheless, their use should be strategic because students need sustained exposure to English to develop communicative competence. This conclusion is also supported by research showing that code-switching can facilitate understanding while requiring careful management to avoid limiting English development (Martine, 2018; Vuzo, 2010).

4.2 Teachers' Strategies for Supporting English Language Learning

The study found that teachers employed several strategies to support students in bilingual classrooms. These included code-switching, translation, scaffolding, group discussions, debates, presentations, role plays, peer learning and the use of teaching and learning materials. The strategies were particularly useful for students who had different levels of English proficiency because teachers could provide explanations in familiar languages before encouraging students to use English.

Code-switching was particularly important because teachers used it to clarify difficult concepts and vocabulary. This finding is consistent with Vuzo (2010), who found that English-Kiswahili code-switching was widely employed by teachers and learners as a coping strategy for meaningful classroom interaction. More recent evidence from Tanzanian

secondary schools likewise indicates that teachers use code-switching to clarify complex concepts and encourage active participation.

Translation and scaffolding also helped students move from familiar linguistic knowledge towards English expression. Teachers could introduce a concept in English, explain it in Kiswahili where necessary, and then encourage learners to respond in English. Such practices demonstrate how bilingual resources can be incorporated into classroom instruction without completely replacing the target language. This approach is consistent with Cummins' (2017) view that knowledge developed through one language can support learning through another language.

Interactive activities such as group discussions, debates, presentations and role plays created opportunities for students to practise English more actively. Such approaches are important because language proficiency requires opportunities to use language for meaningful communication rather than relying exclusively on grammar exercises and written examinations. However, the findings showed that large classes, limited instructional time and differences in students' English proficiency sometimes restricted teachers' ability to provide every learner with adequate opportunities to participate.

The study also found that teaching and learning materials supported English learning. Textbooks, dictionaries, charts, supplementary reading materials and locally prepared resources provided students with additional exposure to English. However, shortages of instructional resources limited independent learning and reduced opportunities for students to encounter English beyond teacher explanations. This finding is consistent with the broader evidence that inadequate resources can constrain effective teaching and learning in Tanzanian secondary schools.

4.3 Challenges Affecting Students' English Language Proficiency

Limited exposure to English outside the classroom emerged as one of the major challenges affecting students' English language proficiency. Students mainly used Kiswahili and indigenous languages at home and in their communities, while English was largely associated with school activities. Consequently, students had limited opportunities to practise English in natural communication settings. Adamson (2022) similarly identified the dominance of Kiswahili in students' everyday environments as a major factor limiting opportunities for English practice in Tanzania.

Fear of making mistakes also affected students' willingness to communicate in English. Some students avoided speaking because they were concerned about incorrect grammar, pronunciation or negative reactions from peers. This finding suggests that language learning is influenced not only by exposure and instructional methods but also by learners' confidence and classroom environment. Teachers therefore need to create supportive environments in which students can practise English without fear of humiliation.

The study further identified inadequate professional development as a challenge. Some teachers needed additional support in bilingual pedagogy, communicative teaching approaches and strategies for working with learners with different levels of English proficiency. This issue is important because effective bilingual teaching requires teachers to understand when and why to use familiar languages and how to transition learners towards greater use of English.

Inadequate teaching and learning resources also constrained students' English development. Limited access to textbooks, dictionaries, supplementary reading materials and other language-learning resources reduced opportunities for students to read, listen to and practise English independently. This challenge becomes more significant when learners have limited opportunities to use English outside school because school-based resources may constitute their principal source of English exposure.

Finally, examination-oriented teaching practices affected communicative English learning. Teachers placed considerable emphasis on grammar, writing, comprehension and examination preparation, leaving relatively less time for speaking, listening, role play and other forms of authentic communication. This creates a situation in which students may acquire knowledge that helps them answer examination questions but remain less confident in spontaneous English communication. The finding is consistent with the wider Tanzanian concern that language-of-instruction practices can affect both classroom interaction and students' academic performance (Nzingula, 2005).

5.0 CONCLUSION

The study concludes that bilingualism has both positive and negative influences on English language learning among secondary school students in Mbeya City Council. Kiswahili and indigenous languages provided valuable linguistic resources that supported comprehension, vocabulary development, confidence and classroom participation. At the same time,

excessive reliance on familiar languages and limited opportunities for English practice constrained students' communicative proficiency. This conclusion is consistent with Tanzanian research showing that code-switching can facilitate comprehension but requires careful management to support rather than replace English learning (Vuzo, 2010; Martine, 2018).

The study further concludes that teachers play a central role in mediating between learners' existing linguistic resources and English language learning. Strategies such as code-switching, translation, scaffolding and interactive learning activities can help learners understand English and participate more effectively. However, these strategies require adequate teacher preparation, appropriate instructional resources and sufficient opportunities for students to use English.

Overall, the study concludes that Kiswahili and indigenous languages should not be regarded simply as barriers to English learning. Rather, they should be strategically incorporated into teaching to support understanding while learners are simultaneously provided with sufficient opportunities to use English. Such an approach is consistent with the evidence that multilingual classroom practices can support meaningful interaction when they are deliberately and pedagogically managed.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that secondary-school teachers should adopt strategic bilingual teaching practices in which Kiswahili and, where appropriate, indigenous languages are used to clarify difficult concepts and provide scaffolding, while English remains the principal target for communication and practice. This recommendation is supported by research showing that English-Kiswahili code-switching can facilitate comprehension and classroom participation, although it should not replace sustained English practice (Nzingula, 2005; Vuzo, 2010).

The study recommends that educational authorities strengthen continuous professional development for English language teachers. Professional development should focus on bilingual pedagogy, strategic code-switching, translanguaging, scaffolding and communicative language teaching so that teachers can effectively manage multilingual classrooms. This is particularly important because recent Tanzanian research indicates that

teachers' code-switching practices are influenced by pedagogical, institutional and classroom-management considerations.

The study recommends increased provision of English language teaching and learning resources, including textbooks, dictionaries, supplementary reading materials and digital resources. Such resources can increase students' exposure to English and provide opportunities for independent learning, particularly where English is rarely used outside school. The importance of increasing English exposure is supported by research showing that the dominance of Kiswahili in learners' everyday environments limits opportunities to practise English.

The study further recommends that schools create additional opportunities for authentic English communication through English clubs, debates, drama, presentations, reading activities and peer interaction. These activities can provide students with opportunities to practise English in less examination-oriented contexts and develop greater confidence in using the language. This recommendation is particularly relevant because the present study found that limited exposure to English outside formal classroom activities constrained students' communicative development.

Finally, the study recommends that language-in-education policies and classroom practices should recognise Tanzania's multilingual linguistic environment. Kiswahili and indigenous languages should be treated as potential resources for supporting learning rather than languages that must be completely excluded from English classrooms. At the same time, schools should ensure that students receive adequate opportunities to develop English proficiency. This balanced approach is supported by Tanzanian research showing that multilingual practices can facilitate classroom interaction, while poorly managed code-switching may fail to develop strong competence in either language (Vuzo, 2010).

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