

The Challenges Associated with Enforcing School Language Policy in Kenyan Public Secondary Schools

Nyongesa Jacob Wekesa^{1*}

¹Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Educational Media, School of Education, Moi University, Kenya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/jaep.2025.v09i06.001>

| Received: 05.03.2022 | Accepted: 13.04.2022 | Published: 03.06.2025

*Corresponding author: Nyongesa Jacob Wekesa

Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Educational Media, School of Education, Moi University, Kenya

Abstract

Recent research has shown that Kiswahili is faced with lack of full implementation of language policy at various levels yet scholars have argued that language policy performs a substantial role in the enhancement of performance as well as the comprehension of the language. It is based on this thrust that this study was carried out to explore the challenges associated with enforcing school language policy in secondary schools. The study was conducted in 30 out of 300 public secondary schools found in Bungoma County. Stratified, purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to sample the target groups. The questionnaire and focused group discussion guide and document analysis guide were used to collect data. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics which included the use of frequencies, percentages and narrations. The study established that the challenges associated with the enforcement of school language policy were dependent on the type of school. In view of the above findings, it was recommended that day sub-county secondary school administrators, both in rural and urban areas should come up with stringent measures in enforcing the school language policies because of the nature of their schools. It is hoped the finding of this study would help MOEST, principals of schools and teachers in formulating school language policy that aim at enhancing students achievements in languages offered in the curriculum.

Keywords: Challenges, Associated, Enforcing, School, Language Policy.

Copyright © 2025 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Benson (2004), teachers can be a challenge to the implementation of a mother tongue based system. He found out that when teachers are not native speakers of the child's LI or lack of sufficient training on how to carry out the mother tongue based teaching they aren't the regress to the "known badly." In other words, teachers revert to old systems of teacher controlled interactions and in this case, pupils are merely required to repeat content after the teacher and they are denied chance to ask questions or express hesitations that they have. This kind of experience makes language learning unpleasant for children because it is mechanical.

The wrong assumptions that if teachers can speak a child's LI, then they can teach it are also another challenge that needs to be addressed. Benson (2004) notes that without specific formal training on multilingual strategies and practices, instruction is likely to be ineffective. For example, in Kenyan,

primary school teachers undergo a two year training course after completing their secondary education and they are trained in 10 subjects. This kind of training means that teachers lack the opportunity to gain the necessary competence and specific training in mother tongue based teaching. The current study investigated the role of language teachers in enforcing school language policy.

Bamgbose (1991) notes that Kenya's policy makers make sweeping statements about how language shall be used without specifying how the implementation process will be carried out. The policy makers assume that all they have to do is to spell out how language is to be used in education, and principals, teachers and learners shall toe to the line. This is a challenge because when policy lays down strict limits on how language can be used, it neglects the everyday reality of usage between teachers and students and largely becomes irrelevant to them and irresponsible to their needs.

Muthwii (2007) notes that language policy faces tremendous challenges as regards language attitudes, with English literacy being the mark of being educated and those with literacy only in local languages are viewed as being in the “bottom of the pile.” The same is echoed by Bunyi (2005) where children were punished when they spoke their home language within the school compound. The punishment given to those who flout the rule actually lowers the status of indigenous languages yet they are expected to acquire literacy in their LI in first three years in primary schools.

The learners’ negative attitude toward languages in school poses a great barrier for effective policy implementation. This negative attitude emanates from the fact that learners have limited competence in the language, therefore preventing them from actively participating in classroom activities and out of classroom activities that involve language policies such as debating, symposia and writing competitions (Usó Juan, 2006). Given that Kiswahili and by extension English is a second language to some learners, most of them have difficulties in comprehending their structures. A more recent research carried out by Tella *et al.*, (2010) shows that Kiswahili language classes have minimal learner participation due to the fact learners do not have the necessary competence which was not advanced all through their formative years. This minimal learner participation may be linked to learners’ negative attitude towards the subject which eventually leads to significant levels of underperformance in the usage of Kiswahili. Therefore, the secondary school teacher within the context of this examine struggles to assist inexperienced persons achieve the anticipated proficiency. It is only when this attitude is changed that substantial implementation of the learning policy will take place.

1.2 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To explore the challenges associated with enforcing school language policy in secondary schools.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

What challenges are associated with enforcing language policy in secondary schools?

1.4 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

Reports from research conducted in Kenya show that Kiswahili has been skewed against by English (Muaka, 2011; Ogechi&Bosire 2002). Nyaga (1994) in her study established that Kiswahili was equated to Kiembu, because both were Bantu languages. Bamgbose (1991) as cited in Gacheche (2010) says that Kenya’s policy makers make sweeping statements about how language should be used without specifying how the implementation process will be carried out and the result is opposite of what was recommended. Timammy and Odour (2016) indicated that the biggest problem facing Kiswahili is the lack of

full implementation of the language policy at primary school level, secondary school level and at the university level. Ogero (2012) revealed in his study that most of the studies done have emphasized the significance of language policy at national level, and failed completely tackle the equivalent at secondary school level. Kiswahili is one of the compulsory and examinable subjects at KCPE and KCSE examinations in Kenya. Kiswahili is also being offered as a foreign subject in about hundred universities in the US such as Havard and others. Currently Kiswahili is both the national and official language in Kenya (GOK, 2010). Kiswahili is still important in the curriculum based competence system of education because it promotes citizenship. It is still offered as a compulsory subject at both primary school and secondary school levels, (KICD 2017). Since the language policy in Kenya is more prominent in organizations such as education, the researcher carried out this study in order to establish the influence of the enforcement of the school language policy and how it affects the use of Kiswahili in secondary schools.

2.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design is the plan that is employed by a researcher that specifies the sources and types of information relevant to the research problem (Briggs, Coleman & Morrison, 2012). It is a strategy that specifies the approach to be used for gathering and analyzing data. In that regard it indicates the procedures and techniques to be used for gathering information and methods used in data analysis (Creswell, 2003). In line with Kothari (2006) a research design is an arrangement of situations for collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance to the research purpose with economy in procedure.

There are 3 major frameworks for designing any investigation; quantitative, qualitative and blended methods. The three study techniques, structure, tactics and techniques are different in a way (Creswell & Plano, 2011). Their philosophical underpinning has a wide range research strategies and methods that may be implemented in particularly different ways. A framework is desirable while it mixes the elements of philosophical ideas, techniques and methods using the three strategies to research. Given the three approaches, the choice of one technique over any other for the design of the study is defined by the research problem, the involvement of the researcher and the target audience for whom the document might be written (Creswell and Plano, 2011).

Therefore mixed method was adopted for this study. It comprised the planned collection of each quantitative and qualitative statistics and the combination of the strengths of each to answer research questions. In mixed method studies, researchers purposely integrate quantitative and qualitative data in preference to keeping them separate so as to maximize

the strengths and minimize the weakness of each type of data (Creswell & Plano, 2014). The collection and analysis of data can be done concurrently or sequentially, or involve integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). This study adopted a concurrent triangulation approach in where both quantitative and qualitative data was collected at same time and using the same respondents. It mixed both quantitative and qualitative research instruments for purposes of triangulation.

Creswell, Plano, Guttman and Hanson (2003) and Johnson (2014) cited that during concurrently accumulating each sorts of facts at the same time, the researcher gets to contrast both varieties of data to search for compatible outcomes. One compares the themes pinpointed within the qualitative facts with the statistical outcomes in the quantitative analysis.

Hence, the study used the descriptive mixed design because it was the most ideal for the kind of data that was collected. Koul (2009) explains that, at times descriptive survey is the only means through which views, opinions, attitudes and suggestions for improvement of educational practice, instructions and other data can be collected. The researcher found it appropriate because it is a fact finding and exploratory with the capacity of establishing the truth.

3.0 FINDINGS OF THE RESULTS

The research objective sought responses on the challenges that schools encounter as they enforce the school language policy. Teachers were given a closed ended question to give their level of agreement on the challenges that was facing enforcement of the language policy. Their response is represented in Table 1

Table 1: Challenges of Enforcing School Language Policy

	LEVEL OF AGREEMENT										
	SD		D		N		A		SA		Mean
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Rampant use of sheng	10	11.11	8	8.9	4	4.4	25	27.8	43	47.8	3.9222
Code switching	12	13.33	5	5.6	4	4.4	35	38.9	34	37.8	3.8222
Use of mother tongue	13	14.44	11	12.2	1	1.1	25	27.8	40	44.4	3.7556
Lack of parental support	10	11.11	4	4.4	4	4.4	20	22.2	52	57.8	4.1111
Resistance to punishment	45	50	25	27.8	5	5.6	10	11.1	5	5.6	1.9444
High student and enforcers ratio	15	16.67	10	11.1	4	4.4	21	23.3	40	44.4	3.6778
Absence of teachers during the weekend	5	5.556	6	6.7	4	4.4	30	33.3	45	50	4.1556
Compromised school council representatives	8	8.889	10	11.1	4	4.4	37	41.1	31	34.4	3.8111
Remaining silent to escape punishment	9	10	14	15.6	5	5.6	28	31.1	34	37.8	3.7111
Semi illiterate non-teaching staff	8	8.889	5	5.6	5	5.6	28	31.1	44	48.9	4.0556

Table 1 indicates that schools faced challenges during the enforcement of the language school policy. These challenges were at different levels. The most prevalent challenge in school was lack of parental support which had a (Mean of 4.1111), semi illiterate non – teaching staff (Mean = 4.0556) and absence of teachers during the weekend (Mean = 4.0556) and absence of teachers during the weekend (Mean = 4.1556). The least challenge to enforcement of language was students' resistance at a mean of (Mean = 1.944). Moderate factors included; remaining silent to escape punishment (Mean = 3.7111), compromised school council representatives (Mean = 3.8111), use of mother tongue (Mean = 3.7556), code switching (Mean = 3.8222), and sheng (Mean = 3.9222). It is important that sheng has been embraced greatly by the youth as it has spread through Kenya like bushfire. It has found a liking in the rural areas and has even gone beyond borders to find popularity in the East African region.

3.1 Ways of Improving School Language Policy

The teachers of Kiswahili proposed the following suggestions.

- 1) Motivation of the students who observed the school language policy.
- 2) Punishment to be administered to culprits.
- 3) All students to participate in the enforcement of the school language policy.
- 4) There should be follow up of the enforcement.
- 5) Hold deliberate competitions.
- 6) Teachers to lead by example by observing the school language policy.
- 7) Drama clubs to be reinforced.
- 8) School administration to be strict with the enforcement.
- 9) Discouraging the use of sheng.
- 10) Guiding and counseling students on the importance of observing the school language policy.
- 11) Involving parents in motivating and punishing students on matters concerning school language policy.
- 12) Increase days for Kiswahili in order to improve its use by students.
- 13) Make the school language poly a school culture.
- 14) Investing in story books for both English and Kiswahili.

- 15) The schools to purchase newspapers both for English and Kiswahili.
- 16) Labeling walls and indicating the importance of school language policy.
- 17) Use of discs to get the culprits.
- 18) To hold symposiums to popularize the school language policy.
- 19) The rule of school language policy should be structured.
- 20) Schools that did not have specific days for each language to do so.
- 21) Three teachers suggested having a specific day for mother tongue speaking in school in order to satisfy the curiosity of students.

3.2 School Principals Responses

In response to the open ended question, Principals gave varied challenges depending on the type of schools. Principals of day secondary schools mentioned rampant use of mother tongue which was mostly translated directly into both Kiswahili and English, lack of parental support in enforcing the school language policy, teachers also participating in using mother tongue while speaking to the students, learners having negative attitude towards the school language policy and at times some students keeping quiet the whole day where punishment was administered to the culprits who flouted the rule. Lack of consistency in motivation and punishment was also cited as a setback in the enforcement of the school language policy. Principals of boarding county secondary schools indicated that most of their students used Sheng most of the time when teachers were alone, especially in the field, dormitories, in the dining halls during meal time and during the weekends. Some of them reported that the members of the students' council were at times compromised by the culprits and therefore did not report the cases as it was expected. However, principals of Extra County and national schools reported that they experienced the problem of code switching and code mixing. Code switching was experienced in girls' schools while code mixing was reported by principals of boys' schools. There was also a report from one of the girls' schools where students preferred speaking English throughout, even on the day that was set aside for Kiswahili

The following are some of the excerpts from the principals:-

Principal 1

Some students lacked foundation when they were in lower primary classes and also the upper class, this is because some of them were taught in mother tongue, lacked exposure to English and Kiswahili languages as only a limited number of people use English and Kiswahili for communication in the community.

Principal 2

Enforcing the school language policy is difficult because of teacher – student ratio. This has

made supervision of students difficult. The high student population has also led to congestion in classes and library which are essential in enforcement of the language policy. It is worse when they are in the field or during the weekends.

Principal 3

My girls do not like speaking Kiswahili amongst themselves on the day meant for Kiswahili. They are more comfortable and at ease speaking English. The Kiswahili teachers have always complained during the staff meetings about the girls' attitude towards Kiswahili which they say it emanates from the negative comments by teachers of English about Kiswahili. Being a national school, my girls are very sharp and they speak fluent and polished English. It's really an issue.

Principal 4

Students experiences difficulties during speaking, when writing, when pronouncing words. Others translate words directly from other languages to English.

Principal 5

The school is located in a rural set up. Teachers communicate in mother tongue (Sabaot) among themselves in the staffroom and on the field. There are times teachers cheer students on the field in mother tongue and influence the students also to cheer in mother tongue. Students pretend to speak Kiswahili in my presence but on their own they speak mother tongue because they come from the same community.

Principal 6

The use of sheng is very common in my school. When solving a case between students I normally get stuck because in most case I cannot comprehend what they are talking about. The sheng that they use is really complicated.

Principal 7

It is really frustrating to admit we are so ineffective, but despite a great deal of effort, students just cannot follow the school language policy. Some of them do not fear punishment. They just have a negative attitude.

Principal 8

Enforcing the English policy is almost impossible. They cannot communicate in English fluently. Some of them decide to keep quiet the whole day on days meant for English. On days meant for Kiswahili they try and even the mean score in Kiswahili is normally higher than in English. Its true practice makes perfect.

Principal 9

Even if we wanted to improve the status of Kiswahili, it's an uphill task. Teachers in my school do

not like supporting the Kiswahili language policy. On Fridays its only I, prefects and if a Kiswahili teacher is on duty that speak Kiswahili on assembly. The other teachers would make announcements in English.

Principal 10

I've asked students in an open free forum why they want us to have to deal with this issue through punishment and why they cannot make the commitment to speak in English and Kiswahili on designated days. They openly told me punishment cannot change them to follow the language policy. They suggested that we allow them to use either of the two languages all the time. They said some forms of punishment is part of their daily work when they are at home.

Principal 11

Problems stem from personality differences between students and teachers. For example, students who don't want to connect on a personal level with their teachers often avoid using the language policy that has been ascribed in school. This personality dynamic frustrates teachers who attempt to bond with each student, only to find their efforts unsuccessful. Personality differences lead to frustration, unhappiness and a lack of interaction between and within students and teachers.

Principal 12

Peer pressure creates problems in the classrooms and outside classrooms when students respond to teachers by acting funny, cool or disengaged. Students might refuse to build relationships with their teachers in order to maintain their not-so-interested-in-school reputations.

Principal 13

Students with unaddressed learning or speech difficulties often struggle to communicate in school settings. Some might have trouble comprehending and organizing their thoughts, and others might rely on hand gestures rather than words. Students often shut down, isolating themselves out of fear or embarrassment.

Principal 14

Teachers teaching Kiswahili are handling three subjects; Kiswahili language Literature, and a humanity which is taught in English. It is also too much for them to supervise in enforcing the Kiswahili language policy by the students.

Principal 15

The learners' negative attitude toward languages in school poses a great barrier for effective policy implementation. This negative attitude emanates from the fact that learners have limited competence in the language therefore preventing them from actively participating in classroom activities and out of classroom activities that involve language policies such as debating, symposia and writing competitions.

Principal 16

Although the curriculum is designed to be covered in a year; teachers are under pressure to complete it by the month of May so as to embark on revision. Teacher learner interaction outside the class is really limited and this impedes effective implementation of other activities such as school language policy that have no direct relation with the completion of curriculum.

Principal 17

The challenges of handling large classes compounded by the acute shortage of teachers puts a strain on the teachers' ability to provide quality service and work outside class such as supervision of school language policy because the teacher-learner ratio is not proportional.

Principal 18

Some students come from background where Sheng is the order of the day. Some parents especially from the urban areas communicate with their children in Sheng all the time. It becomes difficult for us to break the habit. This is common among young parents. Such students give us very rough time in enforcing the school language policy. Sometimes when we invite parents in school to solve discipline cases of their children, such as not observing the school language policy, some parents argue in defense of their children.

Principal 19

The learners' negative attitude toward languages in school poses a great barrier for effective language policy implementation. This negative attitude emanates from the fact that learners have limited competence in the language therefore preventing them from actively participating in classroom activities and out of classroom activities that involve language policies such as debating, symposia and writing competitions. Some students come from very poor backgrounds and lack self-esteem and even fear expressing themselves properly. They even fear talking to teachers because they always feel inferior.

3.3 Results of the document analysis

After a detailed analysis of the staff meeting minutes and departmental minutes, it emerged that some challenges which were listed by head teachers and Kiswahili teachers were discussed and documented. These included; poor supervision of the enforcement of the school language policy, inconsistency in punishment, Kiswahili being given only one day in a week, teachers not being role models, rampant use of sheng and complaints about other teachers telling students that Kiswahili has no value and is easy and therefore can be passed without being practiced by speaking it. In one day school, it was indicated in the staff minutes that some teachers spoke to students in mother tongue on days meant for Kiswahili and told

students that Kiswahili was equivalent to mother tongue.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The challenges affecting the enforcement of the school language policy were varied and many. They were also dependent on the environment. Some challenges experienced in mixed secondary schools were different from those of single sex schools. Day schools had also their own unique challenges as opposed to boarding schools. However, there were a few challenges which were similar in all cases.

5.0 RECOMMENDATION

Day sub county secondary school administrators, both in rural and urban areas should come up with stringent measures in enforcing the school language policies because of the nature of their schools.

REFERENCES

- Bamgobse, A. (1991). Language and the nation: the language question in sub-Saharan Africa. Edinburg University Press.
- Benson, C. (2004). The importance of mother tongue based schooling for educational quality. Background paper prepared for the education for All Global monitoring Report 2005, The Quality Imperative.
- Briggs, A. R., Coleman, M., & Morrison, M. eds. (2012). Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management. 3rd ed. London: SAGE publications.
- Bunyi, G. W. (2005). Language practices in Kenya, Language in Education policy and practice Clevedon: Multilingual matters Ltd, pp. 131-152.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). Qualitative inquiry and research design. Choosing among five approaches. London: sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano, V. L. C. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research (2nd ed)*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., Plano, C. V. L., Gutmann, M. L., & Hanson, W. E. (2003). Advanced mixed methods research designs, in Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (editors). *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social Science and Behavioral Research (209-240)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Gacheche, K. (2010). Challenges in implementing a mother tongue-based language in education: policy and practice in Kenya polis journal vol. 4, winter.
- Government of Kenya. (2010). The constitution of Kenya: Nairobi: Government printer.
- Johnson, R. B. (2014). Mixed methods research design and analysis with validity: A primer. *Department of Professional Studies, University of South Alabama, USA*.
- Kothari, C. R. (2006). *Research methodology: Methods and techniques*. New Delhi: New Age International (P) ltd Publishers.
- Koul, L. (2009). Methodology of educational Research, 4th education paperback.
- Muaka, L. (2011). Language perceptions and identity among Kenyan speakers.
- Muthwili M.J. (2009). Language planning and literacy in Kenya: living with unresolved paradoxes: current issues in language planning 5 (1) 34-50.
- Muthwii, M. (2002). Language policy and practice in Education in Kenya and Uganda. Nairobi: Phoenix Publishers.
- Muthwii, K. (2004). *New Language Bearings in Africa: A Fresh Quest*, 1st Edn. Clevedon, Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.
- Nyaga, C. (1994). Motivating factors for Kiambu-Kiswahili- English code-choice and code switching in secondary schools, unpublished Mphil Thesis, Moi university, Eldoret.
- Ogechi., & Bosire. (20002) Educational published in African languages with A focus on Swahili in Kenya Nordic Journal of Kenya studies 11(2)
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Collins, K. M. (2007). A typology of mixed methods sampling designs in social science research. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(2), 281-316.
- Republic of Kenya. (2017). Basic Education Curriculum Framework. Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development.
- Tella, J., Indoshi, F. C., & Othuon, L. A. (2010). Relationship between students' perspectives on the secondary school English curriculum and their academic achievement in Kenya. *Educational Research*. 1, 390–395. Available at: <http://www.interestjournals.org/ER>[Google
- Timmamy R., & Odour, J. A. (2016). The treatment of Kiswahili in Kenya's education system. The university of Nairobi journal of Language and Linguistics, 5, 174-194.
- Usó Juan, E. (2006). *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Language Skills*. Berlin, New York: M. de Gruyter.