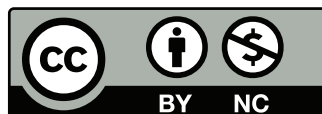


A case for the adoption of Swahili as a language of early school literacy instruction in Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya

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Abstract

Swahili, a national and official language in Kenya, is in wide use in the country as an inter-ethnic medium of communication and, generally, as a lingua franca. The operative language policy for lower primary – up to grade three – provides for the use of languages of the catchment as languages of instruction. The languages of the catchment refer to the more than 42 indigenous languages spoken in the country. The purpose of this study was to determine and discuss institutional and extra-institutional factors that might favour adoption of Swahili as the best medium – in the current sociolinguistic realities – in the ‘language-of-the-catchment-based’ literacy learning in Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya. Data were obtained through classroom observations, teacher and church leaders’ interviews, observation and analysis of language trends at church worship services, and critical literature review. Findings indicate that acquisition-based factors, attitude-based factors, technical factors, and statutory factors – all supported by second language learning theory and research in diverse settings – are in favour of Swahili being used in Gusii as the language of the catchment. We observe that, in the absence of compelling conditions against the foregoing factors, the language might not bear significant adverse learning consequences on learners at the basic education level in the region. We do, however, state that the use of Ekegusii (the mother tongue) for early literacy teaching would have been the best choice were it not for the local sociolinguistic dynamics and the prevailing technical factors.

Key words: Swahili, Ekegusii, language of the catchment-based learning, literacy, basic education, Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya

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Introduction

Educational institutions are the primary contexts for training of populations in literacy, which is considered a prerequisite in all aspects of societal development (Bunyi, 2006). Basic literacy is fundamental in all educational programmes in the sense that it lays a foundation for the development of subsequent diverse literacy skills (Bunyi, 2006; New London Group [NLG], 1996). Literacy is disseminated via language, and experts indicate that unless languages understood by learners are used to teach, expected outcomes in education programmes may not be achieved (Alexander, 2003; Baker, 2012; Bamgbose, 2005; Cummins, 2000, 2005; Okombo, 2000; Wolff, 2006). Research reports concur that languages known and understood by learners are necessary for successful basic education. According to the World Bank (2005), first language instruction results in increased access and equity, improved learning outcomes, reduced repetition and dropout rates, socio-cultural benefits, and lower overall costs. We contrast the World Bank's position with the consequences of the use of exotic languages as means of instruction with the following observation from Alidou:

...(in the case of Africa), the retention of colonial language policies in education contributes significantly to ineffective communication and lack of student participation in classroom activities. Moreover, it explains to a large extent the low academic achievement of African students at every level of the educational system (Alidou, 2003; see also Bamgbose, 2005; Kaschula & Wolff, 2016).

Is use of African indigenous languages possible in basic education in Kenya? What challenges does the approach face? Are there alternatives? Might an African lingua franca – especially Swahili – be an alternative? There are more than 42 indigenous languages spoken in Kenya in addition to foreign languages such as French, German, Chinese, and languages of Indian origin. Some researchers have suggested the adoption of Swahili as a practical option to avoid supposed challenges with the use of indigenous languages (Mathooko, 2009 & Mbaabu, 1996a). In this article, we demonstrate that the use of Swahili as the language of primary education in Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya is possible. We observe that both institutional and extra-institutional dynamics work in favour of the proposed adoption and we state that the language bears all the “subjective characteristics” (Trappes-Lomax, 1990) needed to become a medium of early literacy teaching in the region in place of the native language, Ekegusii. The subjective characteristics include its status as a national language, its general national preference, its lingua franca status, and its teaching as a subject in the education system for the last 43 years.

“Languages of the catchment” in the Kenyan context is used to refer to languages predominantly spoken in the places where students of a given school come from. It is assumed that students will ordinarily have understood the world as referred to by terminology used in those languages. In a multilingual country like Kenya, such languages may be more than one's first language. Policy-makers in the Ministry of Education consider the use of languages learners know and speak well as the best for initial literacy teaching and learning. This consideration is partly due to the fact that English is a distant second language to many students joining primary school.¹

¹ In this article, school pupils are sometimes also referred to as “students”.

We propose adoption of Swahili in the Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya for two reasons: first, the use of English has consistently been associated with poor literacy outcomes (Piper, Shroeder & Trudell, 2015; Uwezo Kenya, 2013); and second, Ekegusii – the mother tongue prescribed for use by the language-in-education policy – is half-heartedly used, and in a majority of cases, it is not used in classroom instruction at all (Mose, 2015). In this situation, Swahili might be a better choice because of its standing as a national and official language and its lingua franca status since pre-colonial years.

Mother-tongue-based education

In the middle of the 20th Century, UNESCO indicated that countries needed to offer education in languages that learners, especially in early primary school, understand and know well. According to UNESCO, the first language – which in most cases in Africa is referred to as the mother tongue – is sociologically, psychologically, and educationally appropriate for that level of education (UNESCO 1953; 2003). Reiterating a similar call in the 21st Century, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) states:

The current research suggests that using African languages as *media of instruction for at least six years* and implementing multilingual language models in schools will not only increase considerably the social returns of investments in education, but will additionally boost the social and economic development of African nations and contribute to the improvement of the continent to knowledge creation and scientific development (2006:7 emphasis ours).

Today, a number of countries across the globe offer early education with first language components. The argument is that children on entering school already have fully acquired a first language and all ideas they have are constructed in that language and subsequent education should therefore use the language as a resource (Ruiz, 1984) in the learning process. Almost all countries in Africa have experimented with mother tongue education, but the levels of success vary from country to country. Except Tanzania, which has been able to use Swahili beyond grade three, many others, including Kenya, offer mother tongue education only up to grade three (Brock-Utne, Desai, & Qorro, 2004; Mose, 2015). Researchers indicate that mother-tongue-based education, in addition to what UNESCO indicates, has a number of benefits, including better teacher-student communication and interaction in the classroom, integration of African cultures and indigenous knowledge systems into formal school curricula, and more successful learning opportunities (Bamgbose, 2005; Chekaraou, 2004; Heugh, 2000).

The current Kenyan language-in-education policy (RoK, 1976) provides for the use of the languages of the catchment in early literacy instruction (up to grade three) in all rural schools throughout the country; schools in urban centres are supposed to use Swahili as a language of instruction up to grade three. Thereafter, English takes over as the only language of instruction. Swahili, however, continues to be taught as a subject up to the end of high school. The pedagogical underpinning of this policy provision is stated in the Kenya Institute of Education's (KIE, the curriculum developer in Kenya) introduction to the primary school education syllabus as follows:

The pupils' ideas and thoughts are in their mother tongue and will continue to be so, long after they have learnt to speak in English. To be encouraged to think for themselves, the pupils must be helped to do so in their own language... When used as a medium of instruction, it provides children with a sense of belonging, self-confidence, and motivates them to participate in all school activities. This provides for a smooth transition experience... The use of mother tongue makes what is taught meaningful since it relates to the child's previous experiences; develop it for greater use since it is the most comprehensive expression of the child's cultural heritage comprising character, moral, and religious values (KIE, 2012).

Underlying our argument-that is change of policy to adopt Swahili for education for Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya-are the principles of an education understood by the students and in which they are able to participate actively as suggested by the KIE. Swahili, from our data, is a language in predominant use in diverse contexts in Ekegusii-speaking areas and therefore its adoption and use may not present pedagogical difficulties to learners at the basic education level. As we state elsewhere in this article, our theoretical position is that Ekegusii would be the ideal medium for early education. However, sociolinguistic dynamics in the region and in Kenya as a whole complicate the possibility of its unhindered use.

Swahili

Swahili the lingua franca

Swahili is Kenya's national language (Amidu, 1995; Onyango, 2005) and a co-official language with English (Republic of Kenya, [RoK], 2010). It is a lingua franca in East and Central Africa spoken by more than 100 million people across the world (Ntakirutimana, 2000). In Kenya, it is considered a neutral language and therefore seems to enjoy support from many ethnic communities (Eastman, 1995; Ogechi & Ogechi, 2002). There has never been a point in the history of Kenya when any ethnic community fought for their indigenous language to be adopted as a national language in place of Swahili. The declaration by the then ruling party (KANU) that the language would be a national language in Kenya in 1974 confirmed this status (Musau, 1998). According to scholars (Chimerah, 1998; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1995; Mbaabu, 1998; Nurse & Spear, 1985), the language has attained its lingua franca status in much of Eastern Africa due to factors such as those listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Factors Facilitating the Spread of Swahili in Kenya

1. Christian Missionary activities: Alphabetization, book printing, and publishing.
 2. Colonial rule.
 3. Mass media: Swahili newspapers, magazines, periodicals, radio, and television.
 4. Cultural activities: Pop culture (music, games, sports, ceremonies, rituals, dances, dramas, and movies).
 5. Economic and social changes: Urbanization, migrant wage labour, and trade unionism.
 6. New infrastructure: Railways and roads.
 7. Nationalist politics.
 8. Government policies.
 9. The school system.
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Note: Except number 2 and 6, all the other factors continue facilitating the spread of Swahili in Kenya. It should be appreciated that each of the nine factors contributed/continue to contribute to its spread. For instance, factor number 6 supported its spread in the sense that speakers-especially business people in the 19th Century – were able to move to the interior due to ease of access using railways and roads hence spreading it.

The factors above have not facilitated the spread of any other language known and spoken in Kenya to a similar degree. In spite of the fact that varieties of spoken Swahili are diverse from region to region (Githiora, 2002; Heine, 1979; Scotton, 1979), the language is widely spread in Kenya and beyond.

Swahili in primary education from 1919-2016

Swahili has been in use in the education system from the entry of the first missionaries in 1844 (Amidu, 1995), but its place and role took shape following recommendations of education commissions set by the colonial government (Commission on Education in the East African Protectorate, 1919 as cited in Gorman, 1974; East African Commission, 1925 as cited in Gorman, 1974; Education Conference, 1929, as cited in Gorman, 1974; Gorman, 1974; Phelps-Stokes Commission, 1924 as cited in Gorman, 1974). It had a role as a language of instruction in especially grades four and five, in most cases, after early education in the various mother tongues. Its rise to prominent use was indicated by its initial signs of growth into a lingua franca. Authorities in those years observed as follows:

There can be no question that some official lingua franca must be adopted. Kiswahili has become the communal lingua franca...and for this reason among others, it is maintained by many competent witnesses that...it is at the moment the only suitable official language (Joint Committee on Closer Union East Africa, 1931, as cited in Gorman, 1974, p. 420).

Swahili's position as a medium of education only changed in 1951, following the introduction of the New Primary Approach (NPA) in which English became a medium of education from

grade one (Mbaabu, 1996b). In post-independence Kenya, the first post-independence education commission further diminished its role as a language of instruction. The commission made the following recommendation:

...Those giving evidence were virtually unanimous in recommending a general spread of this language, not only to provide an additional, and specifically African, vehicle for national co-ordination and unification, but also to encourage communication on an international basis...Kiswahili is therefore recognized both as a unifying national influence and as a means of Pan-African communication over a considerable part of the continent. In view of these important functions, we believe that Kiswahili should be a compulsory subject in the primary school (Republic of Kenya [RoK], 1964).

This recommendation denied the language the all-powerful role of medium of instruction which Tanzania had already reserved for it. It would, however, be allocated the role of medium of instruction from grade one up to grade three in urban schools across the country in the 1976 recommendation (RoK, 1976). Recommendations of a 1981 commission (RoK, 1981) further supported Swahili the subject in that it would be an examinable subject at the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and publications in the language increased. Two successive education commissions in 1988 and 1999 did not alter the place and role so far taken by the language (RoK, 1988, 1999). It is in 2012 that reference to the language was made in regard to its acquisition (RoK, 2012). Sessional Paper Number 14 directed schools to encourage students to use both Swahili and English in and outside school, since both are official languages.

The foregoing outline indicates that the language has had steady sociolinguistic growth due to government goodwill and public support. It is our conviction that a language that has been in public use and in the school system for a century has potential to be a language of instruction, especially in the Kenyan sociolinguistic context. In the rest of this paper, we demonstrate that other factors – in addition to this consistent and historically traceable use of the language – make Swahili the best choice for initial literacy learning in primary schools given the current sociolinguistic realities in many parts of Kenya, using Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya as a case study.

Research design

a. Site

Primary data for the study were obtained in schools, churches, and the public in Gusii of western Kenya, the region inhabited by the Ekegusii-speaking people. The region is the territory of both Kisii and Nyamira Counties of south-western Kenya (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2010).

b. Respondents

Primary respondents were six primary school teachers in six public primary schools (one teacher per school), four teachers in two private schools (two teachers per school), and five church

leaders from both Kisii and Nyamira Counties. Using lists of public and private primary schools from the education offices in both counties, the schools were first purposively sampled to include rural schools, peri-urban schools, and urban schools. The schools were then randomly sampled and two rural schools, two peri-urban schools, and two urban schools were selected – three from Kisii County and three from Nyamira County. In addition, there were two teachers from each of two private schools. Private schools were purposively sampled to include one from a rural area and another from an urban settlement. Other data were obtained in interviews with officials of various church bodies as indicated below – churches in Gusii of western Kenya are a significant social institution since there is at least a church building in every location. On Saturdays and Sundays, in addition to weekday prayer meetings, a majority of the Gusii people attend worship services. Language choices and use during these meetings might be a significant factor in affecting language manners among the community including among school-age students.

c. Data collection

Data were obtained through observation of classrooms, church services, and chiefs' meetings. Other data sources were interviews with teachers and church officials, observation of random public language use in the site of the study, and critical literature review. Classroom observations and teacher interviews were the main sources of data from schools.

Classroom observations were conducted in 2015 by the first author, by sitting in lower primary school classrooms (grades one and two). Notes were taken and audio recordings made of teacher language use during the teaching of content subjects: mathematics, science, and social studies. Mathematics lessons were observed four times, science three times and social studies twice. Further observations were made of language use by both teachers and pupils outside of classroom instruction. Interviews with lower primary school teachers were conducted in July of 2015 at each of the schools. In January 2018 additional observations were made at five local churches outside town settlements, at two chiefs' meetings with the public, and among the public both in public transport and in the streets. These approaches to data elicitation resulted in observation notes and interview transcripts.

d. Data analysis

Primary and secondary data were qualitative, and the analysis was thematic. We grouped data into emerging themes and then data were read and compared across data sets and recurring themes were identified. If a theme in the data occurred in three data sources, it was considered recurring. Themes occurring in only one set of data were ignored in the analysis. The major themes in the study are discussed in the findings below.

Findings

All second language acquisition theories – behaviourist, mentalist, interactionist, and sociocultural – confirm that language input has an important role in facilitating acquisition and learning of second languages (VanPattern & Williams, 2006; see also Ellis, 1994; Lightbown & Spada,

2006). The following factors emerged from the data as catalytic to the acquisition and learning of Swahili, hence making it the most practical medium of teaching and learning in basic literacy teaching in Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya.

School-based factors

Schools are the most significant contexts of second language learning after the home and the community, and our data indicate that schools continue playing a critical role in this regard in relation to Swahili in the site of this study. This role is seen in the institution of language policies (those who flout this policy attract various types of punishment by teachers), in language practices in classrooms, and in efforts to involve parents in the campaign to promote the language. In every public primary school sampled, there is a language policy that requires all pupils to speak in Swahili – since the majority cannot speak in English – while in the school compound. Mother tongues are discouraged. These school practices have been observed elsewhere in Kenya, as well (Wotzuna, 2012). We interpret these as efforts to follow the directions given by the Ministry of Education in a 2012 Sessional Paper that stated that:

National and county education boards shall encourage the use of the two official languages Kiswahili and English both in and out-of-school as provided for in the constitution of Kenya (2010). The language of the catchment area (mother tongue) shall be used for child care, pre-primary education and in the education of lower primary children (0-8 years)...For schools located in metropolitan areas such, Kiswahili shall be adopted as a language of the catchment area (MoE, 2012).

Schools seem to have ignored other sections of the sessional paper by applying the direction selectively. The section on the use of languages of the catchment to teach is ignored. No teacher in the six schools studied uses Ekegusii to teach content subject knowledge. Responding to a question on why they ignore the mother tongue direction, all teachers' responses echoed a response by one of the teachers who said:

...Ekegusii they already know it from home; they do not need it anymore. Plus, Kiswahili and English are international languages. Let me ask you, if we teach in Ekegusii and these children go to a secondary school far away from home, will they use Ekegusii with foreigners? But even the government that says we teach in Ekegusii does not set national exams in Ekegusii... (Teacher response, school 3).

The response indicates that the mother tongue policy is ignored due to teacher beliefs; that pupils already know their mother tongues fully on entry to school; and that teaching in Ekegusii may interfere with acquisition of second languages. There is a further indication that teachers do not seem to understand why a multilingual community needs to learn mother tongues, as well as regional and international languages. This misunderstanding is unfortunate as far as the mother tongue is concerned, but it raises the prospects of Swahili: it increases frequency of input as well as stimulates learner motivation for the acquisition of the language.

Other incidents observed further promote the position of Swahili in the schools. The first of the two incidents, illustrated below, was observed in classroom teaching. According to the

policy, Ekegusii should be used to teach content knowledge from grade one up to grade three, but the following classroom teaching excerpt indicates that instead, Swahili is used alongside English in a lower primary school classroom. This Swahili-English code switching was observed in all schools in the study. Italicized sections in this example are in Swahili.

- T: Ear. Then we have sense of? (Silence). Tasting. Sense of?
T & Ps: Tasting.
T: We use our tongues. Everybody where is your tongue? Can you touch your tongue? Okay. We use it in tasting. *Unapika mboga, unataka kusikia kama chumvi imeingia kwa chakula* [(Swahili) You are cooking vegetables, you want to hear if there is salt in the food]. *Utatumia nini?* [(Swahili) What?] (Silence). *Utatumia nini?*
Ps: (Two) tongue.
T: Tongue? *Utatumia tongue ama utatumia sikio? Utatumia tongue* [(Swahili) You will use tongue or ear? You will use tongue]. You will use the to-?
Ps: Tongue.
(Obsv Sch 2).

This exchange took place at a rural school with a purely Ekegusii language catchment. Justifying this practice of English-Swahili code switching instead of using Ekegusii as prescribed by the policy, a teacher responded as follows (responses of other teachers supported such use);

Tumezoea [Swahili ‘We are used to this’] and we think the children don’t have serious problems with Kiswahili. But we think that even officers have no problem with this way of using both languages as long as the kids understand... (Teacher response school 4).

The response introduces another dimension in teacher assumptions: that children have no problem with the use of Swahili. Additionally, education officers might be in support of its use.

The second incident observed – though coincidentally – in schools was at a parents’ meeting. In that meeting, the head teacher advised parents to assist their children to learn Swahili even at home. “*Waongeleshe kwa lugha ya taifa hata nyumbani na tuwasaidie hapa shuleni na tuisisitize hapa shuleni*” [Speak to them in the national language even at home and we support you here in school and we also insist on it here in school.]. In that meeting – in a rural setup with Ekegusii speakers – the school’s business was conducted almost fully in Swahili. These school practices increase frequencies of the use of Swahili and also increase the contexts of input; in the long run, this might increase interest in acquisition of the language. Further, since the use of English is limited in contexts of use (mainly in the classroom by mainly the teachers), the main beneficiary is Swahili. It is common these days – possibly as a consequence of these trends and efforts – to hear primary school children speaking in Swahili even outside the school compounds in diverse rural settings.

We observe that these school practices may not make the acquisition of Swahili spontaneous and automatic. However, the combined effort of the school authorities and parents may go a long way in influencing pupils’ attitudes towards Swahili. There is a possibility that learner motivation for the acquisition of Swahili may be improved. Responding on the level of success of the Swahili policies a teacher said:

...It was hard *hapo mwanzo* (Swahili: ‘at the beginning’) but we see improvement. They

can speak some broken sentences, sometimes they mix with mother tongue but we thank them for trying, they might know. Last term we gave presents to those who tried very well in speaking the language... (Teacher response, school 1).

It is not strange for second language learners to use broken language forms and to code mix. The response suggests that school efforts have had some effect on pupils' language use.

Outside school factors

There are factors outside the school that support the potential for the use of the language as a medium of early literacy teaching. Fillmore, on second language learning, states that;

What happens in school has very little to do with language learning. Language cannot be taught. It can only be acquired. Kids acquire language in spite of what goes on in the classroom – they learn it in the playground and on the street, but not in the classroom (Fillmore, 1991: 313).

This is confirmed further by other second language learning experts:

Comprehensible input delivered in a low filter situation is the only “causative variable” in second language acquisition. All other factors thought to encourage or cause second language acquisition only work when they provide comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985: 40; see also Ringbom, 1987).

Krashen argues that – in addition to input – a second language is acquired best in a free atmosphere without a learner's consciousness that he/she might make a mistake in their second language speech. Such atmospheres – especially for children – include play. For adults, they include frequent presence of the second language speakers at contexts like social venues and in homes.

Outside school, data from language use and patterns in churches, at chiefs' meetings, and among the public indicate predominant preference and use of Swahili. Incidents observed in rural churches and in public use illustrate this trend. Five rural churches were visited and observed, and leaders were interviewed on the issue of language use during main sermons/Bible teachings. Table 2 shows language preferences at the various churches.

Table 2
Language Preferences at Various Churches in Gusii

<i>Church</i>	<i>Language preferred/used</i>
Christ Gospel Church	Swahili only
International Christ Ministries	Swahili and Ekegusii
Pentecostal Assemblies of God	Swahili only
Seventh-day Adventist	Swahili and Ekegusii
Jesus the King Ministries	Swahili only

Note: Swahili seems to be the dominant language in use in church services.

Table 2 indicates that preference for Swahili is higher than that of the local language. This does not necessarily indicate that the congregants know Swahili well, but it is possibly part of the sociolinguistic phenomenon pointed out by Cammenga (2002), who indicates that Ekegusii is under pressure from Swahili. Explaining why they prefer Swahili in preaching, one of the church leaders commented as follows:

It is attractive especially if you preach in Kiswahili and another one translates. Actually, at one time, we were kind of losing members to Kiswahili Churches and so we changed tact (sic). Locals like Kiswahili singing, Kiswahili preaching. Go to ministries in this region and many prefer Kiswahili, even singing (Church leader response).

The respondent does not point out a theological reason for the use of Swahili but a sociolinguistic one, a trend Muaka (2011) observes is becoming common in Kenya. He says that there is a steady decline in the use of local languages. The language use in churches does not correspond to the language of mathematics or science, but it has its place in affecting language use patterns among the locals. We suggest that this pattern might affect language habits of many, including school-going children.

Other church leaders indicated that a mere presence of one non-Ekegusii speaking worshipper necessitates that the preacher of the day preaches in Swahili, with or without somebody to translate into the local language. In another local church, asked why Swahili was used in preaching in a 100% Ekegusii-speaking membership, a respondent said as follows:

...we occasionally receive non-Ekegusii speaking worshippers. We have made it a practice to use Kiswahili so that we do not discourage would-be worshippers who may be coming from other communities.

This seems to be the argument in all the other churches visited, as well. Another trend in the churches is the division of worshippers into groups for Bible study, and a common trend is to have Swahili Bible study groups and Ekegusii Bible study groups with or without non-native visitor worshippers. The Swahili group members – native Ekegusii speakers – discuss Bible teachings in Swahili instead.

The church trends, we interpret, are born of the following factors: a general association with Swahili as a national language, and ignorance of the significant role of a mother tongue

in literacy teaching and as an ideal medium of knowledge dissemination. As indicated, the use of Swahili is to the detriment of Ekegusii but to the promotion of the former: it improves its predominance hence making it a source of constant input to the community, including school-going children. Constant input is a prerequisite for the learning of second languages (Krashen, 1985). Kenya is a predominantly Christian country and churches are a common presence. For instance, in Gusii, there is a church building in almost every village. The predominant use of Swahili in church activities might be significant in its acquisition and use by the general population.

Chiefs' public meetings (where chiefs solve disputes and articulate government policy) are other contexts of language use in which the use of Swahili was observed. Two meetings were observed in one of the villages away from Kisii Town. The chief addressed the gathering in a mixture of Swahili and Ekegusii. Some of the members of the public – adult members – struggled to express themselves in Swahili, with some getting stuck, in which case they resorted to the local language. Our observation is that since occasionally government commissioners visit villages, chiefs decided to make it a practice to use the national language, because in many cases, commissioners come from other communities. However it may be explained, the use of Swahili is becoming more common among rural dwellers.

Two of many observed incidents of the use of Swahili in public in Gusii illustrate the fact that Swahili is generally becoming a choice language among a majority in the population. First, at a shop at Kisii Town, while waiting for services from the shop owner (a native Ekegusii speaker), an approximately 60-year-old woman entered and struggled to explain herself in Swahili to the owner. The first author, as if to assist her, offered, "Mama, the owner is a local, speak in Ekegusii" Unexpectedly, her response was, "If we do not speak in Swahili, who will? Swahili is our language." Second, the first author sat on a bus next to two young men, about 18 years old, within the Kisii territory. He noted that they spoke almost entirely in Swahili with only occasional interjections in Ekegusii. To his statement, "You speak in Swahili a lot. It seems you like it more than our mother tongue," one of the two responded, "School made us use Swahili a lot. It has become normal to us. We use more Swahili than Ekegusii even at home."

We interpret the first response to possibly be a result of the continued government insistence on Swahili as a national language since independence (1963). Note that the woman described above was around 60 years old and so she has known the government preference for Swahili as the national language throughout her adult life. Gorman (1974) indicates that Swahili was in widespread use in the country from as early as the 1950s. The response from the young men is possibly a consequence of school efforts to promote the language as discussed above. The responses imply that there is a general attraction to the acquisition of Swahili by the population, possibly as a result of pride associated with knowledge and use of a second, prestigious language. Common sentence structures collected from Ekegusii-speaking people indicate that Swahili is dominant in ordinary syntax of the language as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Ekegusii-Swahili Code-switched Expressions

<i>Code-switch</i>	<i>Translation</i>
<i>Haki nonye ninche siwezi kukubali kitu kama hicho.</i>	<i>Sure, even me I cannot accept something like that.</i>
Ing' ai togochia abanto <i>aberefu</i> batokoonye?	Where do we find <i>wise</i> people to help us?
<i>Kama inkwarenge gaa, toka!</i>	<i>If you were not here, leave!</i>
<i>Maneno mengi ntotageti.</i>	We do not want <i>many words</i> .
Timokuna ebintebi <i>kwa sababu</i> birasareke.	Do not touch these things <i>because</i> they might get spoilt.
Onye totageti, <i>kwenda huko!</i>	If you do not want, <i>go away!</i>
Amang' ana amange <i>ni bure.</i>	So much speaking <i>is nothing</i> .
<i>Obochinga</i> bwao nobonge.	<i>Your foolishness</i> is much.
Aye bono <i>tutaonana.</i>	You now <i>we will see one another</i> .
Intwe nabanto <i>bakisasa.</i>	We are <i>modern</i> people.
<i>Amachieso</i> ao namange.	Your <i>jokes</i> are many.

Note: The italicized words in column one are Swahili forms and in some cases code-mixed forms. Note that *aberefu*, *obochinga*, *amachieso* are nativised forms of the Swahili words *werefu*, *ujinga*, and *michezo* [wise, foolishness, and play/jokes]. *Bakisasa* is 'of modern'. *Ba* is Ekegusii, 'of' and '*kisasa*' is Swahili for 'modern'. Those italicized in column two are the switches to Swahili.

We note that the Swahili forms in column one have Ekegusii equivalents, yet the public freely uses these Swahili forms, a further indication that the latter is a common medium of interaction among the Gusii people. These trends indicate a general acceptance and use of Swahili which might be important should the language be introduced for universal public-school education. We observe that it might be difficult to convince the public to accept Ekegusii, since it is considered less significant as far as education is concerned (Mose, 2015). On the other hand, Swahili might not be a significant barrier to classroom communication (Maalim, 2015) to pupils because of its wide use in the learners' environment. The above language choices involve, generally, language manners by non-highly educated speakers of Ekegusii and we consider this as significant; it is these people – i.e. the majority of non-highly educated parents – who enroll children in public schools. This language preference might contribute to the acceptance of the language as a medium in basic literacy education.

Other factors

Other conditions that favour the adoption of Swahili as a language of the catchment for Gusii are the Bantu factor, technical factors, statutory factors, and the media factor. On the Bantu factor, there are inherent morphological and structural similarities that make it easier to transition between Ekegusii and Swahili than between Ekegusii and a non-Bantu language. There is for instance the presence of almost identical vocabulary referring to various phenomena in Ekegu-

sii and in Swahili, a small sampling of which are captured in Table 4.

Table 4
Similar/near-similar Vocabulary in Ekegusii and Swahili

<i>Ekegusii</i>	<i>Swahili</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
omote	mti	tree
amaino	meno	teeth
genda	enda	go
takuna	tafuna	chew
na	na	with
egari	gari	car
egetaabu	kitabu	book
esiimi	simu	phone
esukuuru	skuli	school

The significance of the morpho-phonological closeness of Swahili and Ekegusii vocabulary is the relevance of the former in classroom use both as a language of instruction as well as a subject. It further implies that the development of Swahili to accommodate pedagogic terminology for use in teaching content knowledge might not demand huge technical investment. There is on-going terminology development by various Swahili scholars and book writers of primary and secondary school books in Kenya. The new terminologies are easily understood by students because they are morpho-semantically transparent and they are in a language that is lexically and structurally close to Ekegusii. One approach in terminology development is nativisation, which adapts expressions to the phonotactics of the target language. For illustration, Table 5 shows that there is conspicuous morpho-phonological proximity of words nativised from English to both Swahili and Ekegusii. Further to that, the nativization process into Swahili is fairly intuitive for Ekegusii speakers. But unlike in Swahili, there are no formal ongoing nativisation efforts for Ekegusii for academic purposes.

Table 5
Terminology Nativised into Swahili and into Ekegusii

<i>Swahili form</i>	<i>Ekegusii form</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
helikopta	erikobita	helicopter
ambulensi	ambiurensi	ambulance
aproni	eaburoni	apron
atlas	eatirasi	atlas
bendeji	ebandechi	bandage
betri	ebetiri	battery
blanketi	oborangeti	blanket
chaki	echoka	chalk
faili	efaeri	file
gesi	egasi	gas
hanchifu	ekerangachibu	handkerchief

The main technical factor is that there is rigorous research in Swahili in both terminology development and other theoretical aspects of the language in both universities and institutes in Kenya conducted by post-graduate students and faculty (Musau & Onyango, 2002; Njogu, 2002; Temu, 1984). At one university within Gusii at the department of Languages, Linguistics, and Literature, out of the 21 research titles presented in January 2018 as areas of interest for post-graduate research, five of them dealt with Swahili, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Swahili Titles at a University within Gusii

1.	Swahili acquisition at selected pre-schools.
2.	The role of Swahili in the learning of English among lower primary pupils.
3.	Swahili-English code-switching among primary school pupils.
4.	Practices in the teaching of fasihi (Swahili literature) in selected secondary schools.
5.	The role of story books in the learning of Swahili among standard four pupils in selected primary schools within Gusii.

Research findings from the above titles might be a significant source of information and theory in the development of Swahili as a language of instruction. Further to that, the existence of the university within Gusii will be a source of technical support to schools in using Swahili for teaching. Currently, there are a number of Swahili scholars of Gusii origin working in universities – including the one in Gusii – who, as book writers, consultants, and researchers, may be instrumental in ensuring the successful adoption of Swahili.

A twin factor to research is the writing of Swahili books across the country; Swahili works far outnumber publications in indigenous languages both historically and currently. Some Swa-

hili scholars observe that the rich literary tradition in Swahili is a facilitative factor in the language, satisfying the conditions for its use as a medium of instruction (Ogechi & Ogechi, 2002; Onyango, 2005).

Statutory and media factors – which have national significance – have a bearing on both policy and planning, as well as in increasing contexts of use of the language that facilitate its acquisition and learning. Firstly, the constitution recognizes Swahili as both a national and official language. Secondly, the school language policy allocates the language as a medium of instruction in urban schools up to grade three –in practice, this has been extended to rural schools, as illustrated above. A language with the force of law, coupled with motivational factors to acquire it, has huge potential to become a medium of education. Finally, Swahili is now a very common language, broadcast from more than 20 local radio stations across the country, hence contributing to its spread – which has direct implications on its acquisition and learning.

Discussion

In light of research reports (Benson, 2004; Brock-Utne & Alidou, 2006; Desai, 2012; Heugh, 2006) and from our own research and experience, we hold and support the position that Ekegusii would be the best medium of teaching in lower primary classrooms in Ekegusii-speaking areas of in western Kenya. The sociolinguistic context of our study and other considerations, however, compel us to question the practicality of mother tongue education here.

In this study, we observe that the sociolinguistic trends in Gusii, as presented, provide diverse situations which facilitate generous input of Swahili which, in our view, in turn facilitates acquisition and learning of the language, hence making it a possible alternative medium of instruction. The pedagogical significance of the use of languages of the catchment for early literacy instruction is that learners speak and understand them and that they make dialogic learning and negotiation of knowledge between teachers and students possible (KIE, 2012). Research findings in Kenya indicate that there is widespread non-adherence to this policy provision in actual classroom interaction – including in Gusii (Mose, 2015; Nyaga, 2013) – and that the actual practice is common use of English and Swahili and occasional use of the stipulated languages. The predominant use of English in teaching has not, however, improved learning outcomes; instead, the majority of learners can read words and rehearse in English, but do so without understanding as indicated by some studies. As one study observes:

The evidence is that a single-minded focus on English in Kenyan primary school education is not yielding strong learning outcomes. While prioritising English as the language of instruction has indeed resulted in children who are better at pronouncing English... their mastery of the English language is inadequate for them to understand what they are reading. The data suggest that three years of using English as the predominant language of instruction can impart basic skills in decoding and recognising words, but not the level of English language mastery necessary to understand the meaning of those words (Piper, Shroeder, & Trudell, 2015, p.15).

This outcome on English literacy calls for urgent policy steps to make public education meaningful to millions of learners in primary schools. The reasons advanced for the non-use of the prescribed languages – reasons referred to as “myths” by African language scholars (e.g.

Obanya, 1999) – include lack of books, lack of terminology, lack of African language book writers, and lack of financial resources to sustain the project. In Gusii, as elsewhere in Kenya – and actually in sub-Saharan Africa in general (Nyaga, 2013; Wolff, 2006) – there is an apparent negative attitude towards the use of indigenous languages for teaching in the schools. The negative attitude is, however, not as a result of research findings, but is due to the erroneous association of knowledge and skills with English – the use of which, unfortunately, has not made learning easy for majority of learners, especially not for those in Gusii.

Swahili emerges as an alternative medium that can be adopted as the language of the catchment for Gusii instead of Ekegusii, which is used peripherally in classrooms in spite of being the language prescribed by the language in education policy. A language of education should have the characteristic that it is spoken by the learners and or it is heard in the learners' environment which facilitates both acquisition and learning. As Fillmore (1991) states:

...Language (L2) learning requires the help of and involvement of people who already speak it: their speech behaviour allows the learners to figure out how the language works, provided they (speakers) are mindful and considerate of the learner's limitations (p. 52).

For Gusii, data indicate that Swahili meets this threshold and in instances it might be thought otherwise, the cost of resources to make it possible is manageable. Adopting Swahili may not, however, automatically solve the problems experienced with English instruction (e.g. lack of expert second language teachers, lack of diverse contexts of use, and poor infrastructure) and mother tongue education (e.g. negative public attitudes); it will require reasonable allocation of both human and non-human resources to make its use meaningful. For instance, there will be need of resources to publish both textbooks in content subjects and readers, to train teachers in Swahili education, and to sustain the project for several years. A further need will be to encourage Swahili writing and the generation of terminology in the various content subjects. It is reasonable to assume that the two county governments – Kisii County and Nyamira County – and other funders can meet the cost of the project. The adoption of Swahili addresses problems associated with other language choices in this specific context: firstly, the choice of English, the use of which has results inconsistent with the objectives of basic education; and secondly, the choice of Ekegusii, the use of which faces widespread negative attitudes. Adopting Swahili is not a perfect solution to language in education problems, but a choice made out of lack of options; in Gusii, Ekegusii would be the default choice.

We make this recommendation, but also propose that school children might also continue acquiring literacies in Ekegusii as they grow up, as theorized by Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 2000), which states that mastery of a first language facilitates and supports the acquisition of subsequent languages since languages share common features. Further to that, we suggest that it might be easier to implement Swahili education for the following reasons: it is the preference of teachers and parents (ironically against educational language policy), it bears sentimental value among the public, and it is in widespread use among locals.

We further observe that the findings of this study have national implications; the Gusii region exists in the larger Kenyan sociolinguistic ecology. For instance, Swahili is both an official and a national language, it is a Kenyan lingua franca, the role of the language in education is handled by a national ministry of education, and its other sociolinguistic dynamics are not limited to Gusii. We therefore state – in light of our findings – that the country may consider adopting the language as a national medium of education for lower primary education.

Conclusion

Research indicates that the use of mother tongues to teach is undesirable to both teachers and parents who, instead, desire English (Mose, 2019). On the other hand, the use of English to teach at basic levels has had very poor learning outcomes (Uwezo Kenya, 2013, 2014, 2015; see also Piper, Shroeder, & Trudell, 2015, p.15) mainly because the language is exclusively heard in the classroom, unlike both Swahili and other mother tongues, which are heard and spoken in many other contexts outside the classroom. The adoption of Swahili in Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya emerges as a practical choice in the circumstances. This conclusion does not imply that the knowledge of and use of Ekegusii is inferior to that of Swahili; it is an admission and confirmation that Swahili has spread in the Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya to the point where it is almost as common in use as Ekegusii, and is therefore a reasonable alternative as a medium of education in basic literacy. It is, though, an admission that the use of English is not producing the intended outcomes as indicated by research.

Swahili is a second language to the majority of the dwellers of Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya, but it possesses the features Fillmore (1991) outlines as necessary for its acquisition: speakers who know the language to provide access to the language and a social setting that brings learners and speakers into frequent enough contact to make its learning possible. The sociolinguistic and other factors that we discussed above are not peculiar to the site of the study only, but they apply – often to an even greater degree – to conditions throughout the country. Swahili stands in the enviable position between the poorly regarded (in regard to their use as instruments of education) indigenous languages and a highly regarded “unassailable but unattainable English” (Alexander 1999; Obanya, 2004). Its adoption, therefore, as a language of instruction in basic literacy instruction in Ekegusii might bring to an end the effects of half-hearted implementation of mother tongue education and also bring to an end the effects of an education in English not comprehended by majority of school-going children. The adoption is not the ideal but a practical compromise, given the realities that define Ekegusii-speaking areas of western Kenya.

Funding acknowledgement: This work was supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of the Republic of South Africa under grant number 82767.

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