

The Tanzanian Student's Struggle with the English Language: Acquisition of English as a  
Second Language, with Specific Focus on the Education System in Tanzania

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**Abstract**

The way medium of instruction is set up in Tanzania's public school system is unique. In primary school, students are taught in Swahili, the national language, but upon their transition to secondary school, they are taught solely in English. This transition occurs at a time where students have not even gained full mastery in Swahili yet which causes there to be a lack of transferable linguistic skills from first to second language acquisition. There is an emphasis placed on English in education in Tanzania because it is viewed as the language of success. Policy makers in Tanzania do not realize that educational success and attractiveness for future careers are two different things and should be treated as such. The current system in Tanzania is producing students that are not succeeding in their academic subjects as well as not becoming proficient in the English language; it is setting up their students for failure. The language problem is only exacerbated by a lack of funding for schools and unqualified teachers. In order for Tanzania to truly produce successful students, a serious change needs to be made to their system regarding language in their schools. The best option would be a true bilingual education program where an equal emphasis would be placed on English and Swahili.

**Chapter 1: History, Language, and Education in Tanzania**

In order to understand how language affects the education system of Tanzania, one must first look at a brief history of the country. Tanzania's past greatly shapes the country it is today in all aspects. First, the name Tanzania did not exist until much later in its history. The country was known as Tanganyika. This country was home to an area known as Olduvai Gorge which is often referred to as "The Cradle of Mankind." It got this nickname as fossils were once discovered there that were rumored to be over two million years old (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, n.d.). The first people in Tanganyika were thought to speak Bantu languages, which eventually developed into the current national language of Kiswahili (Swahili) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, n.d.). Tanganyika did not have any formal borders before its colonization. It was largely a tribal nation who had their own unofficial borders (Yahl, 2015, p. 2). The lack of formal borders meant there was also a lack of formal education. The main teachers were tribal elders who only taught their youth various tribal traditions and skills (Yahl, 2015, p. 3).

Colonization introduced the beginning of formal schooling in Tanganyika. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans began to grow interested in exploring Africa to find various resources; Tanganyika did not go untouched. It was the Germans who first colonized the region, specifically Karl Peters who formed the German East Africa Company in 1885 (Lambert, 2018). The Germans began to introduce church and formal schooling to the tribes through the sending of hordes of missionaries to the country. Their main goal was to "unify the tribes" and form a universal language so they could all easily communicate with one another (Yahl, 2015, p. 3). Germany and Britain had an agreement with each other on how Tanganyika was to be divided up

until World War One. Britain had control of an island off Tanganyika known as Zanzibar while Germany had control of the mainland (Lambert, 2018). After Germany lost World War One, it lost all of its colonies, including Tanganyika which was transferred to the British. The British had a similar attitude towards education as the Germans. They believed strongly in education centered around religion, so mission primary schools became incredibly popular during this time. In fact, the British colonial government developed a trend where it was expected for churches to manage and operate primary schools (Samoff, 1979, p. 50).

The government had a much more commanding role in the education of its youth after gaining independence. This was largely due to the influence of the first president of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere. The former school teacher formed the Tanganyika African National Union which fought for independence under the slogan of “Freedom and Unity” (Lambert, 2018). Independence was eventually achieved in 1961, and once Zanzibar gained its independence as well in 1963, the two nations merged, creating the nation of Tanzania in 1964. Nyerere chose to run his government based on his form of African socialism known as Ujamaa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, n.d.). This policy placed a priority on community, specifically with the goal of forming collective farms where food and other goods would be produced for all residents. In short, this policy was not successful at all as it negatively affected Tanzania’s economy and agricultural production (Lambert, 2018). In Tanzania, though, Nyerere is still looked upon as a hero as he had a very positive affect on the nation’s education system. Keeping the title of “Mwalimu,” or teacher in Swahili, throughout his presidency, he placed a greater priority on primary school education (Yahl, 2015, p. 4). He developed a policy for education known as “Education for Self-Reliance” which placed a focus on the development of the individual with the intention of benefitting the well-being of the entire country. Nyerere wanted

the education system to teach students “self-independence, responsibility, and democratic involvement” (Sanga, 2016). Students were, ideally, to use these developed character traits to learn how to solve societal problems, develop a deeper sense of nationalism, and prepare to enter the agriculturally based workforce (Sanga, 2016). This educational approach helped the numbers of children enrolled in primary school to dramatically rise which in turn boosted adult literacy in Tanzania (Yahl, 2015, p. 4).

An important aspect to Tanzania’s history and overall character is the groups that dwell within its borders. A prominent group still present to this day in Tanzania is the Maasai, a semi-nomadic tribe that resides along the Great Rift Valley in Northern Tanzania (Yahl, 2015, p. 8). The Maasai have always had limited access to education because they live a rather traditional way of life. They live in communities known as *bomas* where it is common practice for the men to herd and hunt while the women cook and care for the children (Bonini, 2006, p. 379). They live without modern luxuries such as electricity and running water. Due to the fact that the Maasai often live in such isolated communities to maintain their way of life, many Maasai children do not attend school, but rather get a “typical” Maasai education. For females, this education is designed to gear them towards their future lives as wives. They learn how to milk cows, care for children, cook, and do other types of chores around the *boma* (Bonini, 2006, p. 385). Males have two options: they can become a warrior (*morán*) or a herder. *Morán* boys must go through a rigorous initiation process where they learn how to hunt and fight which takes up most of their time. Some fathers will allow their sons to delay their initiation until after they have finished primary school, but this is not common practice as the skills learned in school have no relevance to their future lives as a *morán* (Bonini, 2006, p. 388). Males that choose to go along with the herding path will receive a traditional education in animal husbandry. It is very hard for

Maasai shepherds to attend school in many ways as herding requires active participation. Adult Maasai shepherds have also passed judgement on formal schooling, claiming “a child that goes to school cannot be a good Shepard.” The justification for this statement is that going to school changes the way Maasai boys think, specifically their cognitive reasoning, as they are removed from a pastoral setting and immersed in an academic one (Bonini, 2006, p. 388).

In the beginning of the 1990s, only about 33% of Maasai children attended government primary schools, instead gaining the aforementioned forms of traditional education compatible with their lifestyle. Very few Maasai children went on to attend secondary school from there (Bonini, 2006, p.383). As primary school has become mandatory in Tanzania, more Maasai children have been attending primary school at the minimum. Their parents have conflicting views about this. One side of the spectrum believes that the formal schooling system serves as a divider between their children and the traditional Maasai way of life (Bonini, 2006, p. 389). On the other hand, some more modern-thinking Maasai parents praise Tanzania’s formal school system as it teaches their children Swahili, which has become incredibly useful for communication with outsiders as many elders only speak the Maasai language of *Maa* (Bonini, 2006, p. 390).

Language in Tanzania is a very interesting phenomena to examine. The national language of Tanzania is Swahili, but the country in general is very linguistically diverse (Mohr & Ochieng, 2017, p. 12). Many tribal languages are spoken along with Swahili, but English has a huge role in Tanzania as it is the medium of instruction used in all secondary schools. Essentially, Swahili is used as the medium of instruction through primary school, but once students move onto the higher grade levels, all their subjects are taught in English. The role of English in Tanzania can be linked with its colonial past as it was first introduced to the country

when it was a British colony. Britain imposed their language on the colony and its influence never faded (Mtallo, 2015, p. 1). There is a strong link in Tanzania with speaking English and wealth. Being able to speak English is viewed as “socio-economically valuable” as the skill is needed in order to gain higher paying jobs. Many Tanzanians recognize that in order to be successful in their country, they should learn how to speak English (Mohr & Ochieng, 2017, p. 16). In their private lives, though, it is rare for Tanzanians to use English. In a study conducted by Susan Mohr and Dunlop Ochieng, Tanzanian college students were questioned about their use of English outside an academic setting. Only 4.4% of those questioned claimed to use English at home. A majority of the study claimed to use English primarily in an academic setting and more through writing than speaking (Mohr and Ochieng, 2017, p. 15).

Similar to other aspects of Tanzanian society, the use of English in Tanzania is politically motivated. English is the language of commerce, science, foreign relations, and technology (Makewa, Role, & Tugata, 2013, p. 36). Moreover, for Tanzania to catch up to many Western nations in these subjects, the use of English is extremely necessary. English is and will forever be a “world language” (Mtallo, 2015, p. 1). It is a symbol of upward mobility, so has become valued by many economically struggling nations, like Tanzania, to strive for success. The reality of the presence of English causing “economic and social merits” to third-world countries is under scrutiny. The presence of this “language of success” has not caused overwhelming positivity in nations like Tanzania. It can be argued that the pressure to learn English has caused students to “demonize African languages” to the point where they see English as the only useful language to share their knowledge (Mtallo, 2015, p. 5). English will never completely replace Swahili in Tanzania. In the private scene, Swahili is still largely the language spoken. Swahili will always

be a part of Tanzania's identity, not only because it still is the national language but its Bantu roots go back for centuries in the area (Mohr & Ochieng, 2017, p. 16).

The strong influence of Swahili in Tanzania draws the question of why the language is abandoned and replaced with English as a medium of instruction once students reach higher levels of education. In order to look at this issue, the structure of Tanzania's education system needs to be examined. The Tanzanian school system is broken into two distinct levels of schooling: primary and secondary school. Primary school is only seven years; it is the equivalent of elementary and middle school in Western cultures. At the end of primary school, students must take a national exam in order to qualify for secondary school (Yahl, 2015, p. 7). Primary school is mandatory in Tanzania, but secondary school is not. Secondary school can be compared to the western version of high school, but it is a little different. Towards the end of secondary school, students take another national exam. If they pass, they move onto more advanced grade levels where they take more specialized classes. When attending school at these higher levels, the government will assign students to a "government school" if they achieve high enough test scores. If not, the parents of the student can choose to pay for more advanced education in private schools (Yahl, 2015, p. 7) In reality, only about 30% of students who attend primary school in Tanzania go on to secondary school (Yahl, 2016, p. 6).

As aforementioned, Swahili is used as the medium of instruction in primary school, but once students age out into secondary schools, the medium of instruction changes to English. This means that all subject areas are taught in English, besides a specific Swahili language class. English is taught as a subject starting from the beginning of primary school, so students begin learning the language at about five years old (Mohamed & Banda, 2008, p. 95). Tanzanian primary school students are taught English as a single subject for seven years, and then are

expected to know the language thoroughly enough that they can learn all their subjects in English. Many students are not successful in this and struggle academically once in secondary school; they are expected to go “way beyond their linguistic abilities” (Mohamed & Banda, 2008, p. 107). It is hard for students to meet learning objectives in English with their level of linguistic skill (Mtallo, 2015, p. 1). Students struggle especially with their English writing skills as their writing is not advanced enough for higher learning (Mohamed & Banda, 2008, p. 95). Grammar, tenses, and vocabulary are the biggest issues seen amongst these struggling writers (Mohamed & Banda, 2008, p. 99).

It is commonly seen for students to leave secondary school and move onto higher learning without fully mastering the English language (Mohr & Ochieng, 2017, p. 15). It is not unusual for teachers in secondary school to practice code-switching, or alternating from English to Swahili during lecture. This is also seen among students when they are expected to be using English in class discussions (Mohamed & Banda, 2008, p. 106). Since teachers are at fault of doing this as well, it creates a never ending cycle that increases the chance that students will not accurately learn English at the level they should be. Some teachers claim that they use Swahili if they see a student really struggling with a concept in English (Mtallo, 2015, p. 4). While this may be helpful to the student, this practice hinders their development of learning the English language at an advanced level. This makes their future experience in Tanzanian universities, which are also taught in English, extremely difficult.

There are many factors that make the switch of medium of instruction from Swahili to English in secondary school questionable. First, teachers often are not extremely able English speakers in the first place. Tanzanian parents will often blame the teachers lack of linguistic skill in English as the reason that their children are not building on their English language skills

(Makewa et al., 2013, p. 36). Secondly, there is most definitely a lack of appropriate resources in Tanzanian schools. Often times, the textbooks provided to students are from Western cultures so are at a much more advanced level than these English learners can handle (Mtallo, 2015, p. 2). This is just the beginning of the plethora of issues facing Tanzanian students in the modern age, but all are centered around the nation's decisions around medium of instruction in their schooling system.

## **Chapter 2: My Experience**

In the summer of 2017, I got the opportunity to spend three weeks in Tanzania. Not only was I able to hike Mount Kilimanjaro and go on a safari in the Serengeti, but I was able to interact with many locals. I talked with Tanzanian students, principals, and teachers and observed a number of different primary schools.

I left New York on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017 and I arrived in the Arusha region of Tanzania the following day. From there, we were taken to a village, Maji ya Chai, where we stayed at the Leaders of Tomorrow Community Center. The center is home to about twenty orphans, and gives these children opportunities to live in a loving community while receiving an education. On our first full day in Tanzania, some of the residents of the center took us to the local primary school most of them attend. While the walk was only about 10-15 minutes, it was along a very uneven, rocky road. I struggled wearing sneakers, so I could only imagine what it must have been like for those students that had to walk even farther in less supportive shoes. Many of the orphans wore flip-flops or other types of sandals; I could not imagine walking to school every day in all types of weather conditions in such shoes.

Once we arrived at the school, the first thing I noticed its interesting setup. Instead of one building, the school consisted of a number of spread out classrooms. We were told right away that this school in particular did not have electricity in all of its classrooms, so had to make use of natural light. The classrooms did not have that many windows to function off of natural light alone, but the students ensured me they made it work. They also claimed that they had many lessons outside if the weather permitted it. They confirmed this by showing us a series of diagrams that were painted to the outside of some of the buildings that contained teachable information in subjects like geography and biology. Peering into the windows of the school, I was taken aback by how run-down each of the classrooms appeared. Almost all the desks looked broken and the chalkboard was falling apart. I did not see any diagrams or pictures on the walls in the classroom, so the students definitely were not exposed to a very print-rich environment. Interestingly, when we arrived back at the community center that day, we were given a tour of the privately-funded school residing on the grounds. The private school was very nicely decorated, with educational diagrams and vibrant artwork everywhere. The school was also spread out in several classrooms, but they had rooms such as a computer lab that the government school did not have. The differences between the private and government school was clearly rooted in funding allocated to each one.

After seeing one of the primary schools for myself, I was eager to talk to a couple of the residents at the community center that attended that school. One of the residents, Baraka, was in the later stage of his primary school years. He had a very strong passion for school and loved science as he aspired to be a doctor. After talking to him for a while, I asked him how comfortable he felt with the fact that he would be taught solely in English when he moved up to secondary school. Baraka was a very intelligent student who was at a very high level of linguistic

skill in English, so I understood when he told me that he was not worried about the transition. He did tell me, though, that in preparation for secondary school, many of his classmates struggle with lessons taught entirely in English. I also asked him, in his opinion, if he thought his teachers spoke English well. He responded that he did think his teachers spoke English relatively well, but it was just easier for them to use Swahili instead of English to explain certain concepts.

One of my favorite days during my entire experience in Tanzania was when I was able to visit two primary schools in the Mto wa Mbu area. First, we visited the Baraka Primary School which was known for its high volume of students that come from a Maasai background (see discussion on pp. 5-6). While there, the principal of the school, Samuel, spoke to us all about the various aspects of his school. He told us that there are typically about 123 pupils in one classroom, pretty much evenly divided between males and females. I asked him if he noticed any differences in the schooling process between females and males. He said that specifically amongst the Maasai students, females usually go to school longer than males as males are expected to herd cattle. Samuel claimed that it was rare, but sometimes Maasai girls would get pregnant while still attending school. These girls usually do return to school after giving birth, but often go to a different school to “lessen any psychological damage.” I was extremely interested about how he felt about Tanzanian students’ transition to secondary school. I asked him how hard it was to get into secondary school. He responded by saying that students have to pass a national exam. If they do pass this exam, which tests them on nine different subjects, it is their choice whether they want to continue their education. After this, I asked him directly about how students typically react to the transition to being taught solely in English. He said that this transition is very hard for many students; it is common for them to drop out of school because they cannot handle it.

After leaving Baraka Primary School, we went to another primary school in the area. We were first brought into an empty classroom. There were not that many students there that day because the government schools were technically on vacation. The students that attend school during break are typically the ones that are struggling so go for extra help. The classroom, it was very barren with not many diagrams on the wall. The chalkboards and desks seemed in better condition than the first classroom I saw in Maji ya Chai, but it still looked very run down. We were eventually brought into a classroom with students and I got to talking with one of the teachers there. Her name was Josephine and she claimed that she loved being a teacher. She became a teacher because it was a guaranteed paycheck at the end of every week, but she seemed like she truly enjoyed getting to work with her students. I asked her what the most challenging subject she teaches is to which she responded “English.” She claimed she felt more comfortable speaking and teaching in Swahili over English. She did not agree with the transition of medium of instruction from primary to secondary school, although she understands being proficient in English will give students the best opportunities available to them.

My observations of the education system of Tanzania reflects modern practices that went into effect after the resignation of Julius Nyerere in 1985. After ruling Tanzania for over 20 years, Nyerere left the presidency with Tanzania’s economy in ruins. Ali Hassan Mwinyi became president after Nyerere; he made the goal of his presidency to repair the economy and encourage foreign investment. Tanzania’s economy began to grow under Mwinyi. In 1992, Tanzania’s one party system was replaced by a multi-party system that is still present in the country to this day (Lambert, 2018). A huge change came to Tanzania’s education program in 2001 when the country stopped charging students formal school fees. This act, which was part of the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP), helped increase access to primary education for all

students in Tanzania (Dennis & Stahley, 2012, p 47). The PEDP's other goals included improving the overall quality of education in Tanzania and to "build retention" among primary school students. Although the main aim of the PEDP was to achieve universal primary education for all children in Tanzania, this has not been achieved yet. 15-20% of children under the age of 15 in Tanzania do not attend school. This could be due to a number of factors including exterior costs (for books, uniforms, etc.) or family values, such as being Maasai (Dennis & Stahley, 2012, p. 480).

Historically, English began dying out in Tanzania in the 1970s-1980s as Swahili was used more prominently (Ngonyani, n.d.). The goal of the Second Five Year Development Plan, established in 1969, was to gradually replace English with Swahili as the sole medium of instruction for all levels of schooling, including higher education, throughout Tanzania. This plan never actually got put into effect in Tanzania as it was rejected by government policy makers (Ngonyani, n.d.). After spending a few weeks in Tanzania, it became clear to me how important Swahili is to the country's identity. Although many Tanzanians used English to the best of their abilities to communicate with me, I could tell it was not their language of choice. When the people I encountered spoke among themselves, it was always Swahili that was being used. Even when I was in academic settings, like the schools, Swahili was the main form of communication. I did not pick up on a desire for any Tanzanians to use English unless to communicate with foreigners. I believe this shows that the need to speak English in Tanzania is rooted from a desire to communicate with the Western world. This caused a question to emerge in my mind, though, of is a desire to communicate with the Western world a strong enough reason to base the medium of instruction in higher education in a country whose national language is Swahili on a foreign language? To me, it seemed like this decision might be

sacrificing students developing an affinity to a part of their nation's culture to construct them into linguistically well-rounded people.

### **Chapter 3 – Language Acquisition**

In order for one to understand the importance of teaching language in an educational setting, one must first learn how language is acquired. Language can be defined as a “verbal and written system in which certain sounds and symbols come together to convey meaning;” it is the main way all human beings learn to communicate with one another (Khan Academy, n.d.). This is something that children pick up on at a very young age, therefore making the first few years of a child's life critical to overall language acquisition. This important time in a child's life is described through the “critical period hypothesis.” This hypothesis claims that primary language acquisition must occur during a “critical” period of a child's life which should occur before that child hits puberty. If a child learns language after this time, it will be a gradual process. This is not to say that there have not been cases where children have developed their first language after puberty, but it is definitely a slow struggle if this is the case (Huhle & Snow, 1978, p. 1114). Although first language acquisition is not something that can be explicitly taught, a parent's action of speaking to their child from birth helps this acquisition. A child merely hearing spoken language will help progress the language acquisition process because children pick up on language through interaction (Birner, n.d.). Moreover, a parent's first conversation with their child can be defined as “baby talk,” which is when parents use an extremely simplified vocabulary to talk to their baby. Although parents are not necessarily teaching their child language by doing this, they are exposing their child to their language. This exposure will

eventually progress into the child making vowel sounds, such as “aaa” or “ooo.” These sounds are further expanded on to include consonants which often lead to the child saying their first word, commonly either “mama” or “dada.” The child will eventually learn how to place two words together which eventually leads to the formation of sentences (Birner, n.d.).

There are many different theories that help scholars explain language acquisition. The most well-known is the nativist theory. This theory has a basic principle that language is something that humans can innately develop, or that there is something present in human genes that allows humans to acquire language (Khan Academy, n.d.). Several linguists have provided research to support this theory. For instance, Eric Lenneberg claimed that language relates to specific species, meaning every species has their own patterns for language acquisition (Brown, 2014, p. 28). The famous linguist Noam Chomsky has provided further support for this theory with his research on the language acquisition device (LAD). This device can be defined as a “little black box” located somewhere in the brain that makes learning language possible for humans. The LAD is believed to have a number of innate skills, such as identifying speech sounds and organizing linguistic data, that make language acquisition possible (Brown, 2014, p. 28). The nativist theory also claims all human languages have a “universal grammar” which is understood to be part of human’s LAD. This genetic disposition to grammar attempts to explain how children can pick up on complicated speaking mechanisms at such a young age. Moreover, since the nativist theory relies so heavily on an innate disposition towards language in the human brain, this means that damage to certain areas of the brain can negatively affect language acquisition in humans (Khan Academy, n.d.).

Another widely regarded theory of language acquisition is the learning theory. This theory claims that language is mastered as one would master any other skill: practice. Language

is learned through a series of “repetition and reinforcement.” This would explain the importance of parents constantly speaking to their children at a very young age possesses. Not only do they talk to them, but they provide positive reinforcement for them by smiling or hugging their babies after babbling or making any type of vocalization. This theory carries through to learning language in more formal settings, like the classroom, as teachers provide praise when students speak correctly. On the other hand, when a student says something incorrectly, the teacher provides insight to correct the student. The main issue linguists have with this theory, though, is that it claims that children learn language based on solely the things they hear, which does not explain how unfamiliar words are acquired (Khan Academy, n.d.).

Another very widely regarded theory explaining first language acquisition is Lev Vygotsky’s Sociocultural theory. According to this theory, children learn language due to a desire to communicate with their surrounding environment, so is therefore dependent on social interaction (Khan Academy, n.d.). Basically, a child’s environment is critical to that child learning language. There are a number of factors that go into creating an ideal environment that promotes growth of language according to this theory; these factors can be described through mediation and meaning (Eun & Lim, 2009, p.15). Mediation is when socially meaningful activities evolve natural behavior into higher mental thought. In terms of learning language, this can be done using a number of different methods. One can use material tools, like picture cards to identify an object, but mediation through other human beings is a more well-regarded practice aligning with the sociocultural theory. This can merely be done by an adult engaging in conversation with a child as it supports a language-rich environment (Eun & Lim, 2009, p.15). Meaning describes the belief that children can distinguish meaningful speech sounds from other noises in their environment; this skill, in the long run, allows social communication to occur as it

is learned through human interaction (Eun & Lim, 2009, p.16). Moreover, according to this theory, if a child is growing up in an environment where mediation and meaning are stressed through social interaction, they will develop language.

Second language acquisition is the process by which a person learns and masters a second language. The entire process of learning a second language takes place in a series of five stages. Stage one is typically categorized by an overarching silence among learners; they engage in more observation of conversation rather than participation. Students will begin to understand new words taught in the new language, but they typically do not feel confident enough to use these words themselves. Stage two is known as “early production” which is categorized by students being able to speak very basic phrases. This could be simple greetings, such as “hello, how are you?” Students usually are able to respond to simple questions, such as “When is your birthday?” The third stage is known as “speech emergence.” Students in this stage speak in very simple sentences, using very universal phrases. Not only can they answer questions, but they can usually ask questions as well. Communication problems can typically be seen in this stage as learners do not have a full understanding of proper grammar yet. The following stage is known as “intermediate language proficiency.” Students are finally able to formulate their thoughts into complete statements, representing much more complicated ideas. Finally, once a learner enters into the last “advanced language proficiency” stage, they are considered “on grade level” to learn all content area in that language. The second language should be able to be used as easily as those that speak it as their first language (The IRIS Center, 2011).

Effective practice for teaching English, specifically, as a second language are often debated upon by educators. Stronger foundational skills, in literacy especially, in the first language definitely helps English language learners develop solid literacy skills in English

(Cummins, 2001, p.17). Therefore, students that know their first language extremely well will have an advantage over those students that struggle with literacy in their first language as well. Ideally, if the educational setting allows it, both the first language and English should be used as this bilingual environment will allow the two languages to complement each other. Bilingual environments are not promoted in most schools, though, as it is commonly believed using the first language will take away from education of English (Cummins, 2001, p.18). In the past, speaking the new language was stressed over using other skills such as reading the language. Speaking was learned first and was then proceeded by teaching the student the written language (Almutrafi, 2018, p.185). In modern times, it is largely believed that the two skills need to be taught at the same time. Learners being able to adequately engage themselves in both forms of communication will make for competent language students because spoken and written forms of language complement each other (Almutrafi, 2018, p.185). In many educational settings, there is a lack of emphasis placed on speaking skills. Many times, when speaking is practiced, it is through the instructor asking the student a direct question, thus not giving the learner a chance to engage in a natural conversation. Outside of an academic context, English is typically not practiced at home so many children learn the language without getting those true conversational skills (Almutrafi, 2018, p.188). In modern times, a huge focus on teaching English, or any other language, as a second language is grammar. This method of study is known as the grammar translation method, and its main principles focus on learning a language by a close study of its grammatical rules before applying this knowledge through translation of texts (Almutrafi, 2018, p. 185). This places a large priority of reading skills over conversational skills; this imbalance is not beneficial for the student.

As research shows, acquisition of a second language is much easier and effective for students if they have mastery in their first language. If students have a strong foundation in their first language, these skills will carry through to learning the second language if taught properly. In Tanzania, Swahili is put on the back burner as soon as students enter secondary school, immediately replaced with a high priority placed on English. Tanzanian students are, therefore, not achieving mastery in Swahili as such as strong focus is placed on learning in their academic subjects in English. Moreover, the decision by Tanzania's government to have English be the sole medium of instruction in secondary schools is actually negatively affecting the students who do not have fully developed linguistic skills in Swahili. This shows that a change is necessary in the way language is handled in the education system of Tanzania in order to ensure students' success.

#### **Chapter 4: Contemporary Challenges in Education in Tanzania**

Tanzania, like many other African countries, faces many challenges when it comes to its education system. In Tanzania's case, most of these issues can be traced back to inadequately using English as a medium of instruction in secondary schools. The language issue in Tanzanian schools only highlights the generalized neglect of the education system found in the country. According to Deo Ngonyani, language has just become the "scapegoat" that shows the overall issue with educational policies and procedures in Tanzania (Ngonyani, n.d.). Controversies arose with using Swahili as a medium of instruction very early on in Tanzania's independent history. Tanzania gaining its independence marked the beginning of efforts hoping to improve the overarching situation of the new country's education system (Kalolo, 2016, p. 56). It was believed to be appropriate to continue issuing Swahili as a medium of instruction in primary schools because it was well-standardized enough for younger grade levels. The transition to

higher grade levels, though, presented issues with medium of instruction for education policy makers. It was believed that Swahili was not standardized well enough at the time that it would be appropriate to use in higher education; grammar, available literature, and dictionaries were not yet at a level soon after Tanzanian independence that would appropriately challenge Tanzania's secondary education students (Ngonyani, n.d.). This belief continues to exist in modern times. Those against changing the medium of instruction to Swahili for secondary education argue that appropriate terms in Swahili do not exist for certain concepts, specifically those related to science. They completely ignore the fact that translations do exist for many subject specific terms in order to keep English alive in Tanzania's education system (Ngonyani, n.d.).

There is a huge issue in Tanzania with students and teachers alike using Swahili when technically not "appropriate." Swahili is not supposed to be used at all in secondary schools, but when teachers see students struggling to understand a concept in English, they will resort to Swahili. It is common for teachers to use the English terms to explain a topic, but when it comes to explaining an actual complex process, Swahili is used (Ngonyani, n.d.). The discretion used in language in secondary schools can be shown through research done by Martha A.S. Qorro who observed several Tanzanian secondary school classes while conducting her research. She cites one example in which a biology teacher attempted to explain condensation. The teacher's explanation in English was met with utter silence, so the teacher decided to explain the process in Swahili. The students were accurately able to respond to the teacher's question, showing they understood the topic (Qorro, 2016, p. 35). If the teacher did not explain the scientific process in Swahili, the students might have not truly learned the topic. Moreover, this practice of "code-switching" is extremely common in Tanzanian schools as it is often the only way to ensure full

comprehension (Mohr & Ochieng, 2017, p.15). Although code-switching might be necessary for students' full understanding of processes involved in their academic subjects, this hinders them from fully learning English, going against the government's wishes. Additionally, Quorro's study included her asking a Tanzanian secondary school student a simple question about how that student's education will be useful in the future. The student responded in very broken English with an answer that would probably not make any sense to any English speaker. When that student was asked the same question in Swahili, the translated response is understandable and well articulated (Qorro, 2013, p. 34). This shows the barrier to communication that is often present in educational settings. Students often show their full knowledge better when they can express it in a language they are more comfortable in.

The use of Swahili in institutions of higher learning is often not considered by educational policy makers who regard English as the only appropriate language to be used in these settings. First, there is not really any restrictions for what language can be used for discussion. For example, a professor at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania would pose questions in English, but when students were left to discuss it, they almost immediately reverted to Swahili (Ngonyani, n.d.). It is the common language shared amongst the masses in Tanzania so it only makes sense that students would chose to use it when speaking with other Tanzanians. If use of Swahili was widely accepted in secondary schools and higher, students and teachers could openly communicate in a language where they have full mastery, rather than have communication gaps in a less familiar language.

Although the use of Swahili in an academic setting presents its own issues in Tanzania, the well-respected status of English also creates challenges. As aforementioned, English is a world language, so many Africans associate success with ability to speak the language.

Tanzanians believe that the opportunities they have of gaining a well-paying, white-collar job increase if they are able to speak English (Quorro, 2016, p. 31). The problem that arises, though, is that most Tanzanian students do not gain adequate English foundational skills in order to go on to truly succeed in the language. All government primary schools in the country use Swahili as the medium of instruction; 99.1% of primary school age Tanzanian children attend these schools. The other 0.9% have the means to go to privately funded primary schools which often use English as the main medium of instruction from initial enrollment (Quorro, 2016, p. 31). The majority of Tanzanian students, though, are left only learning English for a very minor part of the day which is not enough time for these children to build up foundational knowledge of the language. This foundational knowledge is needed in order for students to move onto secondary school to learn all their academic subjects in English; this “lack of proficiency” causes poor performance amongst students in their higher level academic subjects (Quorro, 2016, p. 32). Moreover, Quorro bases her findings on a review of eighteen studies conducted in the early 1970s about medium of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools. All but two of these studies recommended that the medium of instruction in secondary schools should be changed from English to Swahili, and that a widespread program teaching English as an additional language in schools should be developed (Quorro, 2016, p. 36). This recommendation is still valid in contemporary times as Tanzanian students are still struggling with learning their academic subjects in English. This struggle can be seen through an interview with Tanzanian college student, MJ Ismail. When prompted, she explained that her experience learning English was not a very pleasant one. She did not leave secondary school highly proficient in the language, so when she got to university, she was thrown for a loop. Ismail was expected to have much higher

English language skills than she actually possessed which put her sufficiently behind in her studies (Mtallo, 2015, p. 5).

Not only is the use of English as a medium of instruction in secondary schools affecting the academic performance of students, but it is also disconnecting these students from their home culture. This idea is well represented by the concept of English linguistic imperialism. This way of thinking, developed by Robert Phillipson, aligns the dominance of English on a global stage to the constant “reconstruction of structural and cultural inequalities of English and other languages (Quorro, 2016, p. 32).” Basically, more resources are given to education in English than that in other languages which places these languages much lower on the totem pole from a global standpoint. Consequently, the heavy emphasis placed on learning English in the Tanzanian school system lowers the status of Swahili as essentially useless because it might not make students the most valuable future employees. The reality is that only 15% of the population in Tanzania speak English (Ngonyani, n.d.). Although English may be the most popular language in fields such as commerce and science on a global setting, nationally, this is not the case. In the public sector of Tanzania, Swahili is the language largely used for communication, not English. Swahili is even used amongst government officials because it is the language many Tanzanians, no matter their education level, are comfortable using (Quorro, 2016, p. 36).

Sadly, the viewpoint that English is the only logical choice for medium of instruction in secondary schools is a common opinion among Tanzanian students. When asked in a survey about preferred medium of instruction, the majority of students said that they would prefer for it to remain to be English instead of Swahili. This shows that Tanzanian students have the idea that English is the language of success drilled into their heads. They believe that changing secondary school’s medium of instruction would actually lower education standards in the country (Mohr &

Ochieng, 2017, p. 15). This shows that many Tanzanian students believe that learning all their academic subjects in English is the only way that they will be able to fully learn English. They have no understanding of bilingual education programs, which would allow them exposure to English while learning in Swahili.

Often times, Tanzanian students' struggle with the English language stems from their teachers' struggle. It is very common for Tanzanian teachers to not possess very good skills in English. Their English is often not at a high enough level for them to be teaching other students the language. This was shown through Martha Qorro's study when she sampled the writing of a first year student at a teacher training college; in Tanzania, one only has to go through a two year certification program to become a teacher. In this writing sample, the future teacher spelled a majority of the English words she wrote out incorrectly, stating things like "deffer" instead of "differ." The writing, grammatically, does not make any sense whatsoever. Quorro notes that the huge issue with this is that in merely a year's time, this student teacher will be expected to go into the classroom to teach others English while she is not proficient in it at all yet (Quorro, 2016, p. 33). It is very difficult to build up these skills in a small amount of time so it is doubtful that she will become proficient in English in just a year's time. This lack of proficiency does not stop individuals from becoming employed as teachers in Tanzania though. Quorro cites another example of an observation of an interaction seen in a Tanzanian school. The teacher does not use correct English when speaking to students so when the students incorrectly respond back in English, she does nothing to correct them. The teacher might not realize that mistakes are being made on both sides (Quorro, 2016, p. 34). Unfortunately, there is a shortage of teachers in Tanzania. This has caused educational policy makers to lower the "passing mark" for teacher certification exams in order to recruit more teachers (Kalolo, 2016, p. 63). This action, though, is

causing incompetent people to come into the educational field, often leading to further struggle amongst Tanzanian students.

In order for students to truly thrive in acquiring a second language, they need to be provided with a motivating, positive environment that encourages their success. Teachers are the main force behind establishing this environment; they are an extremely important resource for learning language (Makewa et al., 2013, p. 42). It is extremely common for students to get anxiety when learning a new language, especially when speaking in public in that language. Teachers need to provide their students with an adequate amount of motivation to learn English, but they often struggle to do this in Tanzania because they do not know the language well enough themselves (Makewa et al., 2013, p. 46).

Parents of school-age Tanzanian students often present issues that do not help the current state of education in the country. Naturally, they want their child to be successful, but often times, they tie this success very closely with learning English. Wealthy families in Tanzania will very often send their children to Uganda or Kenya for boarding schools who are known for establishing good foundational skills in English (Makewa et al., 2013, p. 36). If they see that their child is struggling with learning English, they will often immediately blame the teacher. It is common for parents to blame the primary school teacher for not speaking enough English in class as the reason their child is not proficient in the language (Makewa et al., 2013, p. 36). This attitude that English is success is only further solidified by the fact that it is the sole medium of instruction in Tanzanian secondary schools. This is painting the picture that being educated means learning how to speak English, further downplaying the role of Swahili in the country (Kalolo, 2016, p. 65).

There are many other challenges that exist among the education system in Tanzania, but many of these derive from the language issue. First, lack of resources and funding is a huge problem seen in the country. As aforementioned, after independence, a greater priority was placed on education in Tanzania, but this did not necessarily mean more funds were being allocated towards education. According to the numbers, in 1970, about 13% of annual government expenditures went towards education; this number grew to about 20% by 1980 (Samoff, 1991, p. 673). The data that showed how much money Tanzania's government allocated towards education every year was extremely inconsistent though. This means that despite claims that the budget for education has tripled since around 2000, it is unlikely Tanzanian schools are actually seeing all of this money (Kalolo, 2016, p. 63). This goes back to the problems facing Tanzania's economy as a whole. Tanzania has very low economic growth as it is a third-world country; this makes efficient educational resources extremely hard to afford (Ngonyani, n.d.). The lack of resources allocated towards education in Tanzania reflects the language issue because there is a potential problem with the country being able to afford changing its medium of instruction to Swahili. For instance, Tanzanian educators would need to produce higher level textbooks written in Swahili to replace the English ones that are currently used (Ngonyani, n.d.). It is questionable whether Tanzania has the money in their education budget to afford this. In reality, though, it is more expensive for Tanzania to keep an inefficient education system that is causing their students more struggle than success. The current education system is producing graduates that are not only not proficient in English, but might not be fully adept in language skills in Swahili as well. Less emphasis was placed on Swahili as soon as these students entered secondary school because of the necessity for them to learn their subjects in English. This might have very well produced a gap in learning for them in Swahili which might

negatively affect how they can give back to their largely Swahili speaking community, or the taxpayers that are indirectly paying for their education (Qorro, 2016, p. 38).

### **Chapter 5: Conclusions/Recommendations/Suggestions**

Imagine this: you are a student growing up in the United States going to your local elementary school. You have had about thirty minutes of instruction in Spanish every school day since you were about six years old. All of a sudden, when it is time for you to enter high school, you are told that you are going to be learning all your academic subjects from here on out in Spanish. It is assumed that because you have been exposed and consistently learned the Spanish language for all those years that you should know the language well enough for it to be appropriate for it to serve as the sole medium of instruction in high school. This would mean that every subject you take throughout high school, whether that be art history, trigonometry, or chemistry, would be taught in Spanish. If I told most American students that this would happen to them upon their transition to high school, they would think it was insane. As a former student of the American public school system, I believe it would be impossible for me to graduate high school if I was expected to learn all my subjects in an unfamiliar language. Even if I did have constant instruction in this language since early elementary school, I would still not feel confident in my language skills to the level that I could understand content specific vocabulary and processes in Spanish. Unfortunately, this entire situation is exactly what happens to Tanzanian students upon entering secondary school, only they additionally suffer from a lack of resources, low educational budget, and unqualified teachers.

Clearly, there is a problem with the current policies regarding the transition of medium of instruction from primary to secondary school in Tanzania. Students are leaving primary school without the level of proficiency in English for them to succeed in all their academic subjects taught solely in English. The reason that such a high priority is placed on English in Tanzanian secondary schools comes down to the fact that English is regarded as the equivalent to success. Through a closer look into Tanzania's history, being able to speak English became tied with the potential to be well-off, even if the majority of the population in contemporary times does not even speak English. If this attitude continues in Tanzania, nothing is ever going to be done to address students' struggles with medium of instruction in school. At the end of the day, linguistic ability and potential success in the future job market are two different things, so should be treated as such. Therefore, the first step to address this issue is to increase the value of Swahili in Tanzania's education system. Swahili is the national language of the country so should be treated as such. There are a number of ways this can be addressed. One would be to lessen the amount of time that English is learned in primary school. Currently, Tanzanian primary school students start learning English when they are about five or six years old. This could be reduced to the last two years of instruction in primary school (Ngonyani, n.d.). This would be beneficial as it would allow instructors certified to teach primary school to know less English. If they merely have a basic knowledge of English, teachers should be able to teach students the beginning skills they need in order for them to start building up those foundational second language skills.

If this recommended reduction of learning English in primary schools was to take place, changes would definitely need to be made that reflect policies regarding language in secondary schools. I do not think that the English language should be ignored completely in Tanzania because it is true that knowing English will make students good future candidates for jobs after

graduation. Therefore, I would recommend implementing a bilingual language program into the education system of Tanzania once students enter secondary school. This would give students an equal amount of exposure to both languages, strengthening their skills to gain complete mastery in Swahili while teaching and building upon their knowledge of English. It would allow Swahili not to be ignored by students, thus strengthening their ties to their home culture. It would also allow students to learn the English language, but with much less intensity, so they can strengthen their skills in the language without it becoming too intimidating. Moreover, a bilingual education program would improve students' literacy skills in both languages. The strengthening of the student's language skills in their mother tongue, or first language, is shown to improve the likelihood that the student will be successful in learning the second language (Ngonyani, n.d.). Therefore, implementing a bilingual education program is likely to actually help build on Tanzanian students' ability to learn the English language with success.

In order for an effective bilingual education program to exist in Tanzania, proper training needs to be given to teachers. Since less emphasis would be placed on teaching English in primary schools, these teachers should not be expected to know the English language with exceptional mastery. They need to have a good base knowledge and foundational skills, but that should be sufficient enough to teach students the language at the primary level. Secondary school teachers, however, need to have advanced language skills in both English and Swahili. It is important because they will be constantly expected to use both languages so should be adept in both. This would mean that the nation as a whole would need to provide teachers with better training procedures that place a heavy emphasis on strengthening their English language skills. Teachers, especially at the secondary level, could no longer get away with barely knowing English if this program is going to be efficient.

Obviously, there is an issue with Tanzania being able to afford a better teacher training program, so this goal might not be easy to achieve at all. In my opinion, I do not think Tanzania is in the position, financially, to afford completely changing their education system around. I really do not think that the country is going to be in the position anywhere in the near future to afford to change their education system in my honest opinion. In my eyes, it is an unreachable goal but at the same time their current education system is producing failing students that are the future of their country. If the future of the country is ill-prepared to handle their careers and roles in Tanzanian society, the country will be on its way to a downward spiral and not make any progress on a global stage. A reallocation of funds to improving the education system might make the difference in Tanzania emerging as an economically sustainable country with a bright future for all its citizens.

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