Second Language Acquiescence of Multilingual Students in Tanzania

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Second language acquiescence of multilingual students in Tanzania

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ABSTRACT
This research, conducted at a major university in Tanzania, investigated the personal experiences of multilingual students vis-à-vis the government’s language policy requiring Swahili as the language of instruction (LoI) at the primary level and English at the secondary level. The participants, who spoke 25 different languages as their L1, were placed into 49 different language groups and asked to write what they remembered about the language policy where they attended school. The data show that Gramsci’s cultural hegemony is occurring in Tanzania. The ‘common sense’ is that people truly believe English is symbolic of prestige and power—even though few people know it or use it. The parents insist that their children be taught in English (consensus), and the schools strictly enforce the language policy (coercion). As subalterns, the students in this research reported that they did acquire Swahili, but they also wrote about not knowing the LoI when they began school; undergoing inordinate physical and psychological punishment; feeling their L1s were stigmatized; and learning little English—or any other subject. Thus, the elites of the country have been trying to impose a European language on the citizens—in lieu of an educated, multilingual, African nation.

Pull the ear, the head follows. Bangladesh

The East African country of Tanzania, a former British colony, was ruled by Julius K. Nyerere, ‘Baba wa Taifa’ (Father of the Nation in Swahili) from 1964 until 1985. Known as ‘Mwalimu’ (Teacher), Nyerere based his socialist policies of ‘Ujamaa’ (Familyhood) on three principles: ‘equality and respect for human dignity; sharing of the resources which are produced by our efforts; work by everyone and exploitation by none’ (Nyerere 1971, 50).

Mwalimu was aware that the educational system at the time of his leadership was elitist. In order to be more egalitarian, his wish was to focus on the rural areas, the villages, and provide a basic education to a wider swath of the population. A second goal was to promote unity and cooperation, values of traditional African society (Nyerere 1971). With over 120 ethnolinguistic groups in that nation (Figure 1), this was no easy endeavor, but 50 years later nearly 90% of Tanzanians can communicate in Swahili, either as a native or an additional language (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2021).
As seen in Figure 1, the majority of the languages spoken in Tanzania, including Swahili, one of the two official languages, are of Bantu origin. The other main ethnolinguistic families of Africa are also represented: Cushitic, Khoisan, and Nilo-Hamitic. Swahili, with many loanwords from Arabic and English, is the lingua franca and is used in commerce and the media, including social media, while English, the other official language, is used in the Tanzanian Parliament and the judicial system (Blommaert 2014). Most people in Tanzania speak their local language at home, the regional language in the community (if other than Swahili), and Swahili in school.

The school system in Tanzania is a legacy of the British system, with children beginning primary school at age seven in Standard 1, and ending seven years later after Standard 7. At age 14, some proceed to four years of secondary school (Forms 1–4). Two more years of advanced level (Forms 5–6) are offered at ages 19–20 or older. For the primary grades, Kiswahili is the language of instruction (LoI), while in the secondary levels, English is the LoI, according to Tanzania’s Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC 2014).

The government’s LoI policy is not about second-language acquisition (SLA), but about children being forced to learn a language, Kiswahili in primary school, and English in secondary school. It reflects consensus in that the parents, like other Tanzanians, believe the myth that English is a sign of success in society. It illustrates coercion on the part of the schools, physically imposing the language on the poor kids. This was not what Julius Nyerere envisioned for his country. When addressing how he would implement the ‘Ujamaa’ policies, he wrote, ‘Persuasion–Not Force’ (1971, 130). Mwalimu’s vision was more of a ’passive revolution’, a phrase coined by Gramsci (1971).

Antonio Gramsci’s concepts of consensus and coercion are clearly at work in this East African country, especially in the schools, where many children–and their parents–consent to students’ corporal and psychological punishment as a means of acquiring a second, third, or fourth language. The ‘common sense’ in the country is a belief, a myth, actually, that English is required to be successful. Most Tanzanians perceive English ‘as a magical key to social prestige and power’ (Petzell 2012, 141). Paradoxically, for the majority of educated citizens, that key does not fit society’s locked door. Very few of them actually use

![Ethnolinguistic composition (2000)](image)

*Figure 1. Ethnolinguistic composition of Tanzania.*
the colonial language after graduation, yet Tanzanians, especially young people, believe that as an international language, it is a status symbol that represents global belonging (Afitska et al. 2012; Hilliard 2015; Rubagumya 1989; Vavrus 2002). Thus, the national consensus is that Swahili and English are highly valued, and the coercion on the part of the educational system imposes those languages on the innocent ‘wanafunzi’ (students).

The result of the language policy is not SLA, second-language acquisition, for the majority of the students in Tanzania do not acquire English. Instead, it is forced upon them by the state. This coercion—and consensus—is reflected in the data that was collected for this study.

In the decades since Mwalimu’s language policy was instituted, not much seems to have changed. In 1972, the term ‘triglossia’ was used to explain the juxtaposition of Kiswahili, English, and the multitude of local languages that exist in Tanzania (Abdulaziz-Mkilifi 1972). Today we have ample empirical evidence of the failure of English as the language of instruction. During that half-century, the literature about language policy and ELT has related to language attitudes (Afitska et al. 2012; Hilliard 2015; Rubagumya 1989); lack of English-language proficiency (Brock-Utne 2007b; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir 2004; Qorro 2006; Roy-Campbell and Qorro 1997; Vavrus 2002; Vuzo 2021); and the negative effect of the policy on learning in general (Afitska et al. 2012; Brock-Utne 2004, 2007a; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir 2004; Rubagumya 1986). Ngonyani (1997) called it ‘mise-education’. Tibategeza and Du Plessis (2012) referred to the system as ‘subtractive bilingualism.’ Others have called it a crisis (Roy-Campbell and Qorro 1997).

The current study adds to the literature by providing a different perspective. The intention was to investigate the views of the subaltern, i.e. the students themselves, at the bottom of the hierarchy, who are directly affected by the government’s policies of coercion vis-à-vis language. How do they view their time being required to use Swahili and then English? What do they remember about coercion? This study gives voice to the youth who, in their own words, wrote about being multilingual children in a monolingual educational system. The research questions:

1. What do the students remember about primary and secondary school vis-à-vis language?
2. Was there a language policy at the schools, e.g. Kiswahili or English only?
3. What language(s) did the students use with their classmates outside of class?
4. Are there significant differences among the language groups?

**Methods**

Convenience sampling was employed whereby students in the College of Education at a major university in Tanzania were asked to participate as part of a course in second-language acquisition. A total of 232 second-year students were enrolled in the course, and all but one gave their consent to use their responses in this study. The author fulfilled the ethical requirements for conducting human research through the university’s Directorate of Research and Publications.

The university where the research was conducted is located near a city of approximately 262,000 inhabitants. One-third of the country’s population lives in urban areas, the largest of which is Dar es Salaam, with a population of 2.7 million (CIA World Factbook). In 2020, Tanzania ranked 160 out of 191 countries and territories according to the United Nations’
Human Development Index (HDI), which measures nations’ health, education, and standard of living. The mean years of schooling in Tanzania was 6.4, and the gross national income was $2616 USD per capita. Similarly, the majority of the student participants were from low-income rural backgrounds and worked in small-scale agriculture (many of them identified their parents as ‘peasants’, ‘farmers’, or ‘pastoralists’). Electrical power outages in the city and on the campus were fairly common.

The student participants, who came from different regions of Tanzania, were grouped according to what they identified as their mother tongue, and they were asked to meet in their L1 groups to discuss their answers to questions about SLA topics covered by the instructors (the class was team taught by the author, a white middle-aged North American, and her younger colleague, a Tanzanian lecturer). The students were encouraged to tell personal anecdotes about their SLA experiences in primary and secondary school. The assignments were uploaded to Google Classroom (see Appendix). A total of 49 groups of four-five students each, representing 25 languages submitted the assignments. (see Table 1).

Primarily, these were written assignments in a course on second-language acquisition for future secondary-school teachers. The objectives were to (1) collaborate with fellow L1 speakers to learn what similarities and differences they shared during their lived experiences in primary and secondary school vis-à-vis the language policy, and (2) reflect on those experiences insofar as the content of the SLA course. Secondarily, we were collecting data for a possible paper, and we informed the students that if we used their narratives in our research, only the language groups would be named—the individual students would be anonymous.

We told the students that the content of their narratives was not going to be judged, e.g. if they criticized their former teachers and/or schools. Rather, the assignments were going

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language group (L1)</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sukuma</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swahili</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ha</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bena or Bena/Swahili</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haya or Haya/Swahili</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luo or Luo/Swahili</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyakyusa or Nyakyusa/Swahili</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pare</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaqa</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fipa</td>
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<td>Gogo</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Hehe</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Iraqw</td>
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<td>Jita</td>
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<td>Ngoni</td>
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<td>Nysma/Swahili</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nyaturu</td>
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<td>Rangj</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shambala</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Language groups represented by students in the sample.
to be evaluated on the specifics, i.e. whether they wrote detailed stories about their personal experiences in primary and secondary school. Inasmuch as the class was about second-language acquisition, we wanted these future classroom teachers to reflect on their own individual experiences, as well as hear about their classmates’ experiences in other parts of the country. By asking the participants to work with classmates who identified themselves with the same L1, my colleague and I assumed that they would be more likely to feel comfortable and be open to sharing. We were also curious to see if there were any differences among the language groups.

The students interpreted the assignment differently. Some of the language groups consolidated their language experiences into one or two stories, while others told several stories which represented each individual in the group. As a result, the amount of text varied from group to group, with for example, one Swahili group writing their assignment as four separate stories, each in the first person singular, and another group, whose L1 was Rangi, writing one story using the first person plural.

**Researcher positionality**

As both a visiting lecturer and a researcher, I acknowledged my outsider status a North American, middle-class *mzungu* (white person) and depended on my colleague’s insider perspectives about the students and their lived experiences. Throughout the academic year, the two of us collaborated closely, and he was able to communicate more clearly what was expected in the written homework. For example, the goal of the first assignment was to collect basic demographic information about the student participants. The examples he gave the students about socioeconomic status (SES) related to whether their family ate more than once a day, if they had a bicycle, and what kind of roof was on their family’s house. Manifestations of middle class for the Tanzanian context were eating three meals per day, owning a bicycle, and having a tin roof (not thatch) on their house. As an insider to the culture, my colleague was able to interpret the concept of SES semiotically (Glesne 2011, 186), resulting in more accurate and detailed data.

**Research limitations**

Because the class enrollment was high (232) and not all of the students clearly identified one language as their ‘mother tongue’, the group members were not always consistent. That is, a few of the students began in one language group for the first assignment (about primary school), but moved to another group for the second (about secondary school). This fluidity of groups may have prevented some student voices from being heard.

A second limitation with the data collection was that some of the students were 1) not familiar with and/or 2) did not have access to the technology required to complete the assignments. Many of them submitted documents that were formatted strangely, and some submitted documents that were completely blank–often two or three times on the Google Classroom website. Thus, the data are not as robust as they might have been. Nevertheless, 49 groups submitted at least one of the assignments, with only group one not writing about primary school and seven not submitting their secondary-school experiences.
Data analysis

In analyzing the data, I took an interpretivist ontological approach, believing that reality is complex, fluid, and socially constructed, and a phenomenological view (Husserl 1970) of the narrative analysis, believing that the participants were able to narrate their own realities through the written assignments. Their texts were interpreted as lived experiences within a particular socio-historical context and I was cognizant that the stories were negotiated among the group members. The group assignments were coded thematically, and frequency counts were used to see which themes the students chose to write about the most.

Following van Manen (1990) ‘selective or highlighting approach’ (p. 93), I selected certain phrases from the students’ assignment to categorize or code. For example, in the students’ narratives about primary school, the most salient topic was that of corporal punishment, about which nearly all of the language groups wrote extensively. Because that theme was so pervasive, it generated a number of other codes, i.e. the type of punishment meted out. For example, physical and psychological punitive measures were described, so the new codes reflected those descriptors. Other groups wrote about having to clean the school grounds, so a new code was created, reflecting physical punishment and work. All in all, there were 25 codes. After coding the texts, I created tables with columns so that a summary of the codes, as well as the frequency count, could be seen more clearly, with each language group represented. This process aligned with what van Manen (1990) calls ‘balancing the research context by considering parts and whole’ (p. 33).

Results and discussion

It was clear from the students’ comments that the teachers and staff throughout Tanzania enforced the hegemonic language policy of the government. All of the groups whose L1 was not Swahili (except for one) wrote about being required to speak Swahili in primary school, even when asking permission to go to the toilet, and about a myriad of punishments if they spoke their native languages. After seven years in primary school, the students were conversant in Swahili, but in secondary school the language of instruction (LoI) shifted to English, and the students, as subalterns, were forced to undergo more punishment, this time for speaking Swahili.

What follows is the analysis of the students’ narratives, describing their experiences under a language policy that was often strictly enforced. It includes some of the students’ reactions to the policy, as well as their assessments of their own SLA, of both Swahili and English. The analysis concludes with a comparison of the different language groups represented in the sample.

Primary school: ‘ONGEA KISWAHILI TU’

Many of the university students remembered their first day of primary school as a happy experience. Usually their mother or father accompanied them in order to help with their registration, and sometimes the parent was unable to communicate with the school staff because the former spoke a local language and the latter spoke Swahili. The headmaster often informally quizzed the new student by asking them questions in Swahili, and informed the child of the school’s language policy. Signs were posted outside the office door, ‘ONGEA
KISWAHILI TU’ (No Kiswahili, No Communication). Once the student was admitted to the school, the happiness was overpowered by coercion.

Excluding the groups whose L1 was Swahili, 86% recounted that they did not know Swahili and/or that it was difficult to learn the language. The Ngoni group called it 'lugha ingeni' (a ‘strange language’) and wrote, 'I was not aware of that language'. The Nyambo-speaking students also wrote about the challenges of trying to communicate in a new language, as well as the painful consequences of not knowing how to ask for permission in Swahili:

At school we were not allowed to use our native language (nyambo). Since all of us we were coming from the same community with the same language, teachers had to use different mechanisms to force us to use Kiswahili. I faced difficulties in expressing myself to teachers because I had no enough Kiswahili vocabulary which I could use. Even grammar was very difficult. For example I do remember one day when I was in standard one I peed in my shorts because i failed to ask for permission.²

The repercussions of not knowing Swahili were not just physical, but also emotional, as the Hehe-language group expressed:

In reality we were not happy to be sent to school for the first time simply because the language that we encountered (Kiswahili) it was not friendly for us as we had already experienced our home environment and we enjoyed what we were doing at home and speaking Hehe language that was our mother tongue.

These students were not comfortable being forced to speak an ‘unfriendly’ language, i.e. Swahili. They were happy speaking Hehe at home. The educational system, however, denied them the freedom to communicate—and to become literate—in—their L1. Similarly, the Luo group recounted that they were unfamiliar with Swahili when they started primary school:

… that day was very terrible to me when my father waked me up early in the morning and took me to the school. I managed to be admitted in the school, but the terrible thing is that when I was admitted, I knew no other language except than Luo language. The bigger problem to me was that I could not pronounce and utter any Swahili word, that when I got the rule of Swahili speaking only, I reply suffered.

These children, who had been speaking only Luo their entire lives, were not prepared for the suffering that the Swahili-only policy impinged on them. Many other language groups expressed the same inability to understand and/or speak the LoI in primary school: Bena, Fipa, Ha, Haya, Iraqw, Luo, Makonde, Nyakyusa, Nyaturu, Pare, and Sukuma.

The students’ experiences were as diverse as they were—even in the same language groups. For example, in the Haya group, some of the students had been raised in small villages, whereas others had grown up in more populated areas:

The main reason for us to face problem was due to the fact that we were from typical village where Kiswahili was less spoken or not spoken at all. On the other hand, other two members of our group did not face a big challenge pertaining language. It is because they were exposed in Swahili community before coming to school. That means they lived in town before coming to school where a medium of communication mostly is Kiswahili.

Similarly, other groups reported on this town-village divide as it related to language (Rubagumya 1986). Those who lived in bigger towns, rather than small villages, were exposed to Swahili as the lingua franca, while the children who grew up in villages tended
to know only the local vernacular. They were not put under the pressure of the government’s ‘Ongea Kiswahili Tu’ coercion until they entered primary school.

**Enforcement of Swahili-Only policy**

Not all of the groups indicated that there was a strict language policy at the primary-school level. Four of the Swahili-speaking groups wrote that a strict policy was not necessary inasmuch as everyone spoke Swahili. In addition, five of the groups (10%) said that the policy was not enforced strictly or enforced only in the higher grades. The Fipa speakers wrote, ‘in most of our primary schools pupils spent even a whole day speaking fipa language in and out of their classrooms, except when they were copying notes given by their teachers which had written in Swahili language’. The strategy of copying notes was to compensate for a lack of understanding the language. The students memorized the notes so that they could write something on their national examinations (in Swahili for the primary levels and in English for secondary [Brock-Utne 2007a; Ngonyani 1997; Rubagumya 1986]). The Ha and Nyaturu speakers reported that the policy was not enforced in the early grades so as to give the children some exposure to the LoI before requiring them to use it. Thus, with a few exceptions, the language policy of Swahili-Only was strictly enforced.

**Secondary school: ‘NO ENGLISH, NO SERVICE’**

Secondary schools in Tanzania tend to be more linguistically diverse than primary schools, and boarding schools are quite common. All of the university students in this study reported that there was a strict language policy of English Only, and it appears that the policy was enforced throughout the country. A majority (86%) of the participants wrote either that English was difficult for them or that they did not comprehend or speak the language when they entered secondary school. One of the Sukuma-speaking groups, which had five participants, wrote:

> Within five members, only one who was able at least to talk poor grammatical English at first time, there was the use of single word vocabulary but not full sentence though was able to hear some announcements. Three of us used mostly mother tongue and Kiswahili in some extent. Announcements provided but no understanding enhanced among them. Lastly, one of us had no access neither to English nor to Kiswahili. There was use mostly local language at school despite of having the policy explained bellow.

All five of these Sukuma speakers had the same experience of understanding a few words of spoken English, but not being able to utter a complete sentence.

**English: another ‘lugha ingeni’**

Like the Ngoni group calling Swahili a ‘lugha ingeni’, the Jita-speaking group called the LoI at the secondary level a strange language: ‘A great thing which was challengeable was the language of communication and instructions which was English; it was our first times to be exposed in the environment where people are required to speak such a strange language’. Another student, a Sukuma speaker, felt anxious before attending the first day of secondary school, where English would be the LoI, and asked, ‘how will I speak while I do not know?’
Many of the other students also wrote about their feelings of anxiety and fear because of the English-only policy. For example, one of the Haya-speaking groups wrote this:

When I attended at Buyango Secondary School, it was on Monday and there was a morning parade in which students gathered at the assembly and teachers were announcing various announcements but I could not understand anything apart from the greetings (Good morning). I could see student stepping forward and kneeling down before they were punished but I did not understand what was wrong with them. When I asked my fellow, he whispered to me that ‘wameongea KISWAHILI asubuhi’ (they have spoken KISWAHILI this morning). From there I kept silence the whole day until the time of going home. Thus in fact our first day at secondary school was very terrible since we were exposed to the new language which we did not knew apart from learning it as part of subject in primary school.

The student consented to government’s language policy by remaining silent. They were fearful that they, too, would be punished for not being able to speak ‘the new language’ that they had studied only as a subject in primary school. Sadly, the first day in secondary school was ‘very terrible’.

‘Punish’ is the word that appeared the most in the students’ narratives; it is what they all remembered vis-à-vis the Swahili and English language policies of the Tanzanian government. Other researchers have observed punishment, too (Brock-Utne 2005, 2007a; Roy-Campbell and Qorro 1997; Vavrus 2002). These respondents did not just observe it; they experienced it.

‘Afraiding punishment’

Indeed, the most frequent topic that appeared throughout the students’ narratives about their experiences in primary and secondary school was punishment—both psychological and physical. Only four groups of the 49 did not write about punishment: two Swahili groups, the Mwera speakers, and one Nyakyusa group. All of the others (92%) wrote extensively on the emotional and physical punishments they endured. Three types of punishment appeared in the data: public humiliation, manual labor, and corporal punishment.

Dog bells, cow horns, and tortoise shells

The most frequent type of punishment in the students’ narratives was that of public shaming for not speaking Swahili (in primary school) or English (in secondary school). Ironically, the students were often punished in secondary school for speaking Swahili, which was mandated in primary school. A variety of materials were used to humiliate the individual in front of their peers: a disc, block of wood, ‘dog bell’, ‘cow horn’, tortoise shell, ‘frog necklace’, banana leaves wrapped in the shape of a tire, … Whatever the object, if a child was caught speaking any language other than the LoI, they would have to wear it so that everyone knew they had broken the rules of ‘Ongea Kiswahili Tu’ or English Only. For the Gogo group, it was a piece of wood:

There was strict language policy which needed all pupils to use Kiswahili language when we were at school campus. This made difficulties in communication with teachers simply because they whipped the students who speak Gogo language in the class and out of the class. Also I remember teachers created a piece of wood with rope which was written speak Kiswahili and was given to class monitor during the morning, so if class monitor will see somebody speak Kigogo he give him to wear like a bell on the neck and him have to search for another one who
speak Gogo language the exercise continue up to the dispersal time where teacher starts with monitor and asks you give piece of wood to whom up to the last person with it at the time and all who wear the piece of wood were punished. So this was implementation of the policy.

For the Sukuma group, instead of a rope with a wooden sign, the object the students wore around the neck was a 'bangle':

There was a strict language policy in my secondary school. The policy stated that English should be the major medium of communication and instruction in the school. There were heavy punishment for those who went against the school policy. Students were given manual works such as digging, slashing, carrying bucket of sand sometimes they were canned. Also, some students were given pieces of paper to write statements and short stories in English language. In addition to that, bangles were given to wear on their necks in order to identify the students who speak Kiswahili. I remember one of my classmate, Bahati was given a bangle once caught speaking kiswahili in the class. He was given to wear it for the whole class hours. The bangle read 'IAM STUPID', So, students in the class laughed at him the whole day.

In addition to being an object of ridicule, students like Bahati were punished physically by being caned or by doing manual labor. Not surprisingly, this did not improve their language skills. On the contrary, it silenced many of them or pushed them out of school altogether.

**Slashing grasses and sweeping classrooms**

Similarly, the teachers in both Standards 1–7 and Forms 1–6 used manual labor to humiliate the language transgressors. Many of the students recalled having to do maintenance of the school grounds; often they were lined up afterwards in front of their peers as objects of derision. As the Sukuma speakers mentioned above, they had to cut grass with a machete ('slashing'), dig dirt, and carry buckets of sand as their punishment (other students mentioned cleaning toilets and sweeping classrooms). Unfortunately, writing stories in English was also a form of punishment for some of them. The students’ chastisement now segues from the mental to the physical, i.e. corporal punishment.

**‘Uncountable sticks’**

As the Gogo and Sukuma groups wrote, the ‘criminals’ who broke the rules of the language policy were sometimes whipped or caned. The Bena-speaking group also wrote about physical punishment: ‘I remember one day, one of my teachers slapped me and beat me uncountable sticks because I spoke Bena to my fellow student’. (Corporal punishment is legal in Tanzania [Feinstein and Mwahombela 2010], as it is in 16 U.S. states [Gershoff and Font 2016].) The Luo group recognized it as 'harsh' and some of the teachers as ‘cruel’:

I can remember that teachers introduced the harsh campaign of punishing the vernacular speakers, that if one was caught speaking a mother tongue, was really caned. I can remember well that I was always the victim of this campaign. I really suffered that there passed no single day that passed to me without being caned due to vernacular speaking. I can remember that one day I was one of the pupils who were denied not to go for lunch because we spoke vernacular language. I can remember that cruel teacher Mr. M caned us a lot that day to the point that I started thinking of leaving the school. The most terrible thing is that when I told my father of this thought, he also caned me too that why I was always the most caned in the school due to mother tongue.
This unfortunate Luo speaker was beaten not only by the teacher—so much so that he considered dropping out of school—but also by their father. Nevertheless, they persevered when many of their classmates did not.

The corporal punishment that so many of the respondents confronted in school appears to have its origins in both African culture and British colonialism (Ocobock 2012). It is common in Tanzania, as well as other African countries, with many parents supporting its use as a way to maintain discipline (Feinstein and Mwahombela 2010). That may explain why so many of the respondents appeared to accept the abusive treatment as the norm. However, not all of the students acquiesced; the next section is about students dropping out and other ways they reacted to the strict language policy of the school system there.

**Acquiescence vs. resistance**

According to the students’ texts, most of the time school punishment for speaking their L1 was a source of anxiety and stress, causing some students to drop out. Other times the students saw it as motivation to learn. The majority of these university students acquiesced; a minority resisted, either in speech or action.

One of the Ha speakers wrote about their feelings after having to wear a ‘hole’ around their neck because they failed to speak English: ‘I was crying alone and when I walk around, my fellow students were laughing to me and other ran away from me, that day I felt lonely and disgraced.’ The Jita speakers recounted that they feared having to speak in English in front of their peers. Some of them ran away when it was their turn because they were not able to ‘present something understandable’, while others braved an attempt: ‘one of our classmates shivered to the extent that he felt down when he was presenting the morning speech.’ The psychological impact of the strict language policy obviously affected the mental health of these young people.

At both levels of school, primary and secondary, the students often reacted to the hegemonic language policy with silence. Forty-one percent of the groups mentioned silence in their assignments. One recounted, ‘I remember we stayed silent the whole day because there was no anybody who was able to speak Kiswahili’. This also occurred when the LoI was English, as these Ha speakers recalled:

> The effect of the policy is that we were forced to learn how to speak English. We tried but in most cases we kept quiet, desiring to speak in Kiswahili but fearing the punishments. Sometimes the whole school would remain quite. The only voices that could be heard were the voices of teachers, watchmen and other who were non-students as well as classes who were learning Kiswahili. Students enjoyed Kiswahili classes as they found opportunity to speak without fear.

This self-defense mechanism of silence has been observed by others in classes where English was the language of instruction (Brock-Utne 2007a, 2007b; Roy-Campbell and Qorro 1997).

While some students acquiesced to the pressure of being forced to speak the LoI, others resisted the policy more blatantly. According to the Haya speakers, for example, ‘Heavy punishments were provided to all students who failed to speak English. Most of form one students dropped out due to the punishment’. Form 1 is the first year of secondary school,
which means that a high number of young people are dropouts, or school leavers. According to World Bank/UNESCO (2018), only about half of the students in Tanzania complete primary school, and only half of those go on to secondary school, so it appears that very few young people actually complete their primary or secondary education. The Haya group went on to say, ‘I and my fellow students tried to make efforts on speaking English though we tried in our level best to speak broken English’. The Sukuma speakers wrote almost the same words, which means they, too, acquiesced to the pressures of ‘Ongea Kiswahili Tu’ and ‘No English, No Service’.

A few individual students resisted the language policy in other ways. The Jita group, for instance, wrote that one of them ‘truly hate speaking English’, and when he was called to a teacher’s office, he would refuse to go, saying, ‘it is better to be punished than to speak English’. Another group remembered a classmate who was well-known in his school for asking to be punished every morning so that he would not have to anticipate the pain later in the day. He would then tell his teachers that he had already been punished for breaking the language rule, with the understanding that they would not punish him twice for the same infraction. It appears that even though these youth were subalterns in the educational hierarchy, they retained some agency by maneuvering around the rules.

The young adults reporting these experiences succumbed to the physical and psychological coercion of the educational system. Their resilience carried them through, and as the next section shows, most of them became proficient in Swahili and learned English well enough to succeed on the competitive, high-stakes national exams.

**Second-language acquisition**

All of the 49 student groups wrote that their L1 was the lingua franca in primary school whereas 45 groups responded that as secondary students they used Swahili to speak with their friends outside of class. This is an indication that the Tanzanian government’s language policy is successful at the lower levels of education. Inasmuch as English is not a lingua franca there, it remained somewhat a ‘lugha ingeni’. When asked what language they used outside of class, one Swahili group wrote, ‘we pretend to speak English’, as long as they were under the vigilance of the teachers. Many of them attributed their SLA to the strict language policy and realized that over time, they were able to communicate in the LoI. Others thanked the teachers for their encouragement—and punishment, sometimes—and for pushing them to perform, especially in English. One of the groups whose L1 was Luo expressed appreciation for the severe treatment:

> For sure at this moment when I recall, I can say thanks to my father who supported the act of teachers’ caning me due to speaking Luo. I thank my teachers also who caned me when I spoke Luo and thanks too to my school for placing the rule policy of speaking Kiswahili, that the combination of all these together is as a result of me being able to speak and write Kiswahili today.

These students attributed their SLA to the harsh enforcement of the government’s language policy and thanked their teachers for the corporal punishment. Eleven of the groups credited their teachers – not just the language policy – for their SLA due to their encouragement and kindness. Consequently, as the Pare-speaking students put it, ‘As times went on, from form I to form II, we were gradually started to become friends with English language’.
Perhaps the students should have said 'acquaintances' with the English language rather than 'friends'. Rubagumya (1989) found that Tanzanian students' self-reported English-language ability was 'greatly exaggerated'. Other researchers have reported low levels of English-language proficiency (Brock-Utne 2007b; Hilliard 2015; Ngonyani 1997; Qorro 2006; Rubagumya 1986; Vuzo 2021). Indeed, when Roy-Campbell and Qorro (1997) met with language experts and teachers to share the results of their research, they declared that 95% of Tanzanian secondary students were unable to read and communicate in English. Thus, the students who wrote that they 'pretended' to speak English were probably more representative of the country as a whole.

**Content courses in L2**

The student participants were asked to comment on their earlier school experiences vis-à-vis language. Though we did not specifically ask about mathematics, biology, chemistry, or social science, eight groups realized the importance of language in the content courses. Of those eight groups, seven wrote about memorizing, cramming, and/or not understanding the questions on the national exam because of the English that was used. The Nyaturu speakers wrote, 'mostly it was cramming with little understanding.' The Hehe speakers claimed that some students knew the content, e.g. the biology or history, but they failed the examination due to 'failure to understand examination questions that was written in English language'. In contrast, the Ngoni speakers took advantage of their classmates and asked them to explain the content in their L1:

> If there was a lesson which I did not understand, that was a free time for me to ask my fellow to teach me that lesson in Ngoni language so that I could understand better and actually these techniques yielded fruits because by practicing the techniques I came to understand the lesson effectively.

These Ngoni students showed some initiative and took control of their own learning while the other groups succumbed to the system and failed to learn the content. Unfortunately, the latter are in the majority whilst the former are the exception (Brock-Utne 2007b) due to a lack of resources and poor teacher training (Hilliard 2015).

**‘Bush children’ and ‘town children’**

One of the research questions dealt with differences among L1 language groups. Understandably, the groups that identified as Swahili speakers were the only ones who did not write about the physical and psychological suffering caused by the government's language policy at the primary school level, nor did they find it difficult to communicate in the LoI at that level. The only other difference from the data relates to language status. Twelve of the 49 groups (25%) felt that their native languages were stigmatized in school. One of the Luo-speaking groups remembered the linguicism by the ‘town children’ towards the 'bush children':

> For those students who were able to use Swahili fluently, and failed to understand Luo were termed as town children, and for those who were using Luo and failed to use Swahili language were termed as bush children. This gave embarrassment to those students who were only speaking Luo and termed as bush children to the extent that caused inferiority to them.
These Luo speakers realized that their language and culture were being stigmatized by the educational system. Kiswahili was valued over their L1 and they were made to feel inferior. Mwalimu wanted his people to feel that they were all equal, yet today’s schools illustrate that some of them are more equal than others (Orwell 1946).

Gramsci’s concept of subaltern originates from the military, and the hierarchy of Tanzanian schools parallels that of the military. What is at work is a combination of physical and psychological coercion with rules and corporal punishment to support it, as well as the consensus of society. The students’ parents send them to school and unwittingly participate in the hegemonic process of forcing them to use Swahili as the language of instruction in primary school and then English as the language of instruction in secondary school. As a consequence of this linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992), local languages are the victims of linguistic genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The data from this research is clear evidence that the status quo in Tanzania’s schools is untenable. Whether it is called ‘miseducation’ (Ngonyani 1997) or ‘stupidification’ (Brock-Utne 2007a), it appears that rather than science or social studies or English, children are simply learning how to survive in a harsh, punitive system. For decades, ‘the pupils may pass their examinations, but they will not have learnt anything’ (Rubagumya 1986, 290). Indeed, according to the World Bank/UNESCO statistics, in 2018, when compared with other countries in the world, Tanzania ranked at the 31st percentile in learning. That could change if the government stopped ignoring this problem (Qorro 2013) and followed the example of South Africa’s practice of pedagogical translanguaging (Probyn 2015).

Julius Nyerere’s values of equality and respect for human dignity correspond with the United Nations’ Rights of the Child (1989), which declare that a child from a minority indigenous group has the right to use their own L1 (Article 30). In addition, they must be protected from ‘all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse’ (Article 19). The implications for the Tanzanian educational system are (1) a language policy based on the local language of the school, i.e. the triglossia that many other researchers have recommended; and (2) the abolition of corporal punishment. In other words, the students have the right to an education in their native languages (United Nations’ 2030 Goals) at the primary-school level, where they would also learn Swahili, acquiring it rather than acquiescing to abusive treatment. At the secondary-school level, Swahili would be the LoI, English would be taught as a subject, and the students would no longer be required to undergo the physical and psychological abuse of the current school system (ending violence against children is another UN Goal). These actions would show the world that Tanzania values the multilingualism of its citizens as well as the principles of its founder, the teacher, Julius Nyerere.

**Notes**

1. In the Swahili language, the prefix ki- indicates the name of a language.
2. Due to the number of errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and formatting, errors in the direct quotations have not been acknowledged. In some narratives, the insertion of [sic] would have been too distracting.
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References


Appendix: homework in SLA course

Assignment #2 (primary school)

Discuss the following questions in your L1 group, type your answers in Google Docs, and upload the document to Google Classroom. The group chairperson will include all of the group members’ names in the document, but if someone does not contribute, the ‘chair’ can choose to exclude her/his name.

1. What do you remember about attending primary school for the first time (as it relates to language?
2. Was there a strict language policy, i.e. ‘Kiswahili only’? Explain in detail.
3. During primary school, when you were not in class, what language did you use with your classmates?

Assignment #4 (secondary school)

In your L1 language group, discuss these questions and post your answers in a typed document on Google Classroom. Be sure to include everyone’s name and student number.

1. What do you remember about attending secondary school for the first time (Form 1), as related to language?
2. Was there a strict language policy at your secondary school, i.e. English only? Explain in detail.
3. When you were not in class, what language(s) did you use with your classmates in secondary school?