

LANGUAGE DISPARITIES IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR: THE CASE OF HEARING IMPAIRED LEARNERS IN KENYA

Gertrude Wamae, Department of English & Linguistics, Kenyatta University

Abstract

This paper discusses the disparities existing in the education sector in Kenya. The paper focuses on the challenges faced by the HI learners of secondary school level and beyond as compared to their hearing counterparts. For instance, in regular schools, teachers have been trained on how to teach specific subjects to learners of specific levels. There is a concerted effort to use a standard form of language in order to help learners perform well in academics. This is not the case for the HIL. As a result, the HIL perform poorly in academics. This poor performance impacts negatively on their social-economic status in later years after school, for instance they lack self-esteem and they are not able to compete for the limited university places and good colleges that may guarantee them key positions in the society. The way forward is to address their linguistic challenges with a view to bridging the existing disparities between them and their hearing counterparts.

Abbreviations

HI	-	Hearing impaired
HL	-	Hearing learners
HIL	-	Hearing impaired learners
Std	-	Standard
KIE	-	Kenya Institute of Education
KSDC	-	Kenya Society for the Deaf Children

Background Information on Education of the HI in Kenya

According to KSDC (2000:29-30), education of the HI was established in Kenya in 1958. Before introduction of the 8.4.4 system of education, the HIL had a curriculum different from that in use for the HL. Between 1958 and 1976, the multilingual curriculum was used in the education of the HI with emphasis on teaching of speech together with religious instruction, reading, writing and some arithmetic at the expense of other subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Geography/History/Civics and Business Education between 1977 and 1988, the provisional curriculum and guidelines was used in teaching the HIL. Subjects taught in this curriculum were Speech readiness activities (nursery class), articulation readiness activities (infant class), direct activity (as from Std.1), story telling (as from Std. 1), speech reading (as from Std. 1), auditory training (as from nursery) and group speech (as from Std. 1). I

When the 8:4:4 system of education was introduced in 1985, schools for the HI were to follow the same curriculum as the regular schools. Around the same time, Dr. Michael Ndurumo who had successfully used sign language to pursue university education up to Ph.D. level returned to the country from Gallaudet University, U.S.A. and advocated strongly for its use in schools for the HI. It is important to know that sign language is a language that uses manual symbols and signs to represent ideas and concepts. The term is generally used to describe the language of communication in which both manual signs and finger spelling are employed.

It is the language used by the hearing impaired for everyday communication. Below are samples of signs used by the H.I to communicate and their English equivalents:

The English equivalent of the sentence, 'I love you' is,

(Wamae 2003:7)

The sign below from Yule (1985:161) is the sign for the English word 'Thank-you'.



Finger spelling on the other hand is the use of the manual alphabet to form words and sentences is an illustration of the manual alphabet (Wamae 2003:13).



A	B	C	D	E
F	G	H	I	J
K	L	M	N	O
P	Q	R	S	T
U	V	W	X	Y
Z				

Language situation in Kenya

Kenya is a multilingual country with over forty indigenous languages spoken. This makes the language situation in Kenya very complex unlike in countries like Burundi where *Kirundi* is the only language native in the country. The problem is compounded by the linguistic reality that these forty plus languages in some way have dialects and or varieties. The map below shows the distribution of the major groups in Kenya.

A map of the distribution of Kenya's major ethnic groups



Although the language situation in Kenya is complex, English is the official language and Kiswahili the National language. All along, the language policy in the country has had very little to offer the HI. For instance, in the low and high courts, English and Kiswahili are used. Sign language is not used in such places hence the HI end up being ignorant of the laws in the land because they have not been enlightened.

Language policy on education system in Kenya

The policy that governs the language used for instruction in regular and special schools in Kenya is contained in the Gachathi Report of 1976 (Republic of Kenya, 1976). The report states that the language of the schools catchment area should be the medium of instruction in the lower primary school. The same language policy states that English should be taught as a medium of instruction as from standard Four (KSDC, 2000:23). It therefore follows that from pre-school to standard three children are taught how to read and write in English. It is therefore important that learners should be proficient in English language as this can positively influence good performance in subjects taught and examined in English. After the review of the constitution in Kenya, Kiswahili and Sign language are now official languages.

Improving (academic) performance of Learners' English and Kiswahili in regular schools.

There are various ways in which this is done. In many schools, rules have been devised to ensure that learners interact in both English and Kiswahili. Some schools insist that learners should use Kiswahili language twice a week and English language thrice a week. In such schools, stringent measures are implemented. For instance, some schools have introduced wearing of a disc around one's neck for those learners who do not observe this rule. Other schools engage their learners in activities that will compel them to use authentic English and Kiswahili, for instance, activities such as drama, and debating sessions, choral verses competitions are all geared towards helping learners improve their proficiency in these languages. In most private schools in Kenya, learners communicate in English most of the time. This is a deliberate move to improve performance of learners in subjects taught and examined in English. Given the fact that all examinations in Kenya apart from Kiswahili and some foreign languages are set in English, the continuous use of English by learners allow adequate practice in English usage which translates to improved performance. This explains why in Kenya National Examinations, learners in private schools perform better than those in public schools.

Although teachers in regular schools work towards improving learners' performance in English and Kiswahili, very little is done in schools for the HIL to ensure that they too are proficient in these two languages. Lack of adequate practice in language usage explains why the HIL perform poorly in National Examinations compared to their hearing counterparts. It is sufficient to state that language input has a direct link to language output. There is disparity between HIL and HL in the use of both English and Kiswahili.

Instructional Language as Used by Teachers in Regular Schools.

Generally, in all regular and private schools, there is a concerted effort to use a standard form of language by teachers in order to help learners perform well. Most of the learners learn and acquire language from their teachers.

There are instances when learners subconsciously pick vocabulary as the teacher uses it in the classroom. The use of a standard form of language by teachers therefore ensures that learners are exposed to appropriate input, which is unavailable to them outside the classroom. It is certainly the case that distorted input specifically from instruction may prolong certain stages of intellectual development and slow down the emergence of certain grammatical features. This distorted input is the inauthentic input, which may cause delay in learning what is next.

There are varieties of English learners who are exposed to outside the classroom. The type of English language learners use with their peers may be non-standard but in a classroom situation, standard English is used rather than pidgin or other varieties. There are about seventeen dialects of Kiswahili spoken at the coast of Kenya, for instance:

“Kiugunja”, “Cimiini”, “Kibajuni”, “Kipemba”, “Kisiu”, “Kiamu”, “Kimvita”, “Chifundi”, “Kivumba”, “Kimtangata”, “Kirima” and “Kimgao”. Out of all these varieties spoken, the one that is used in schools is the *“Kiugunja.”*

This is the Zanzibar Kiswahili that is taken to be the standard variety of Kiswahili. In Nairobi and other provinces of Kenya, children may have their own variety of Kiswahili. They may communicate using *‘sheng’* with their peers but in a classroom situation, their spoken Kiswahili approximates the *Kiugunja* variety. Teachers of Kiswahili use this variety to teach. Kiswahili texts and materials for learners are written to approximate the syntax of the standard variety.

Instructional Language as Used by Teachers in Special Schools: Case of the Hearing-Impaired.

It is worth noting that the language used for instruction in special schools is governed by the same policy that states language to be used in regular schools. The Gachathi Report of 1976 (Republic of Kenya 1976) states that in lower primary mother tongue should be used as medium of instruction. In upper primary and other levels of learning, English is used as a medium of instruction. In schools for the physically handicapped and schools for the blind,

English as a medium of instruction is effective. In schools for the blind where Braille is used, the Braille dots approximate the syntax of Standard English. It is therefore reasonable to put it clearly that the blind learners do not experience great language problems while in school as compared to the HIL. They can therefore compete in academics with regular learners on an equal footing and perform well. The physically impaired have no linguistic problem. There is a problem of mobility and so in academics they can easily compete with regular learners on an equal ground. The blind and the visually impaired are exposed to authentic English.

In schools for the HI, teachers have no absolute confidence in teaching specific subjects to their learners effectively. There are some vocabularies teachers are unaware of their signs. In such cases, teachers fingerspell the words for their learners to provide a sign.

Learners come up with varied signs for a particular word depending on where they come from and how the word is signed in their home environment. Learners from different countries for example Uganda or Tanzania may also have their different sign for the same word. Although learners may have different signs for a particular word, they appreciate or accept these signs as synonyms of signs known to them.

There is no standardization yet in the language used for instruction in the schools for the HI. Even when teachers use the instructional manual provided by the K.I.E, they still may not be effective in teaching specific subjects to their learners. This is because the manual comprises a list of about 1,500 signs which are not sufficient to service educational demands across the curriculum. In addition to this, there are no guidelines on how teachers ought to use the manual to teach specific subjects to their HIL. For regular schools, there are teachers' texts that accompany learners' texts. Teachers' texts are intended to guide teachers on how to teach specific topics. This is not the case for teachers in schools for the HI. Teachers in schools for the HI are expected to teach their learners so that they can compete for the limited available chances in colleges and universities with the HL yet they have no comprehensive guideline on how to teach their specific subjects in sign language.

If learners are to benefit from the language of instruction, teachers ought to be proficient in the language itself. This requires that teachers should have a good knowledge of sign language. Proficiency in the language calls for teacher trainers to be equipped appropriately with sign language skills in order to give intensive training to the trainees. Intensive training entails making sign language a separate discipline (independent). Currently, sign language is offered as a unit under Special Education or Special Needs Department and is allotted one semester. This time frame is inadequate for covering the content in a language training session. There is an urgent need for a review and restructuring of sign language courses offered in teachers' training colleges if effective maximum intervention is to be achieved in education of the HIL.

Comparison in acquisition of English affixes: Hearing and Hearing Impaired Learners

Investigating the effects of sign language mode of instruction on acquisition of English affixes. Wamae (2003) used a set of sentences as one of the research instruments. Teachers of English signed the sentences to their Form II learners as they wrote them down. For the purpose of comparing linguistic disparities in the education of the H.I.L. and HL, the researcher gave the same set of sentences to a teacher of English in a regular school who dictated to HL to write down. This was done in class six, which is three levels lower than the class for the HIL. The researcher deliberately avoided giving the set of sentences to a Form Two class in a regular school for the obvious fact that the HIL are known to lag behind their Hearing counter parts in academics because of their disability. The following sets of sentences were given to the learners to write down in the selected schools of study. (Wamae, 2003: 85)

- We had to rebuild the house after the rainy day.
- The preschool prefect is shorter than I am.
- The antimalaria medicines are in the cups.
- We always misspell the word kingship.
- If you overplay, your pencil will be broken.
- They were unable to come up with any new development.
- The most impossible thing has happened
- The post-primary team is fourth in number.

- We will rearrange the room after meeting our class prefect.
- An irresponsible man can easily lose his job.

The researcher was interested in investigating learners' acquisition of the underlined English affixes with regard to the SL mode of instruction used. In the regular class, the teachers dictated all the words in the sentences for their learners to write down.

In classes for HIL, teachers did not sign all the words in sentences. They concentrated on the content words and many times they signed the basic words and left out the affixes. For more information on how teachers signed the sentences (see Wamae 2003). Results of the learners who are able to get the affixed words in the dictated and signed sentences right are as follows:

Results of acquisition of prefixes in terms of frequency percentages (HIL)

Prefix	Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
<u>REBUILD</u>	22	0	0
<u>PRESCHOOL</u>	22	12	54
<u>ANTI MALARIA</u>	22	0	0
<u>MISPELL</u>	22	8	36
<u>OVERPLAY</u>	22	0	0
<u>UNABLE</u>	22	1	4.5
<u>POSTPRIMARY</u>	22	1	4.5
<u>REARRANGE</u>	22	0	0
<u>IRRESPONSIBLE</u>	22	0	0
Total		22	11.1

Results of acquisition of prefixes in terms of frequency percentages (HL)

Prefix	Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
<u>REBUILD</u>	22	18	81
<u>PRESCHOOL</u>	22	16	72
<u>ANTI MALARIA</u>	22	11	50
<u>MISPELL</u>	22	16	72
<u>OVERPLAY</u>	22	16	72
<u>UNABLE</u>	22	18	81
<u>POSTPRIMARY</u>	22	12	50
<u>REARRANGE</u>	22	18	81
<u>IRRESPONSIBLE</u>	22	11	50
Totals		136	67.66

Results of acquisition of suffixes in terms of frequency percentages (HIL)

Suffixes	Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
<u>RAINY</u>	22	2	9.01
<u>SHORTER</u>	22	1	4.5
<u>CUPS</u>	22	3	13.6
<u>KINGSHIP</u>	22	5	22.7
<u>BROKEN</u>	22	5	22.7
<u>DEVELOPMENT</u>	22	0	0
<u>HAPPENED</u>	22	1	4.5
<u>FOURTH</u>	22	3	13.3
<u>MEETING</u>	22	5	22.7
<u>EASILY</u>	22	1	4.5
Total		26	11.75

Results of acquisition of suffixes in terms of frequency percentages (HL)

Suffixes	Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
<u>RAINY</u>	22	18	81
<u>SHORTER</u>	22	18	81
<u>CUPS</u>	22	22	100
<u>KINGSHIP</u>	22	16	72
<u>BROKEN</u>	22	22	100
<u>DEVELOPMENT</u>	22	22	100
<u>HAPPENED</u>	22	16	72
<u>FOURTH</u>	22	11	50
<u>MEETING</u>	22	18	81
<u>EASILY</u>	22	22	100
Total		185	83.7

These results reveal that the mode of instruction used by teachers has a direct impact on learners' acquisition of grammatical forms in Modern English. It is therefore the case that input = output. It is necessary that the teachers input is appropriate. The teacher's input is appropriate if learners are given language that will serve educational demands. This language is unavailable to learners outside the classroom. From these findings it is evident that there are linguistic disparities in education of the HIL and HL. These disparities vary, for example, the manner of training teachers, the mode of delivery of content and also teacher's guidebooks that accompany specific texts.

The Hearing-Impaired and The World of Work.

Since the HIL do not perform well in academics, they are unable to compete well with their hearing counterparts for the limited available chances in colleges and universities. No special consideration is offered to them in selection of learners to higher levels of learning.

The education they get at the end of their school life does not give them the esteem to aspire for higher positions in the society. Instead they resolve to specialize in skills based training and they go for less prestigious jobs in the world of work. One fact that ought to be made clear is that HIL who have no other physiological or mental disorder are not intellectually impaired or different from the HL in any way. They (HIL) are victims of circumstances since they find themselves in a wider society that does not understand them. Even if they make it to universities in Kenya, they really do not get an empathetic understanding. There are no interpreters in higher levels of learning to help them achieve academically. This is a possible explanation why they dot our universities.

Conclusion

There is need to address the linguistic challenges facing the HIL in Kenya. The government and non-governmental organizations need to have a concerted effort in encouraging researchers venture into the area of the HI with regard to their language.

Although the hearing impaired constitute a small percentage of the entire population in Kenya, it would be desirable if publishers got interested in publishing instructional materials to be used in schools and institutions of higher learning for HIL. Funding researches and allowing publications in this area may be a positive move by the government and non-governmental organizations and societies working for the hearing impaired towards bridging the existing disparities between performance of the HL and HIL in Kenya.

References

- Adoyo, P. (2001) 'Emergent Approaches towards bilingualism in deaf Education in Kenya'. (Unpublished) Seminar Paper, University of Hamburg. Gachathi Report (1976), The Republic of Kenya
- KIE (2000), Kenya Sign Language For Schools. Nairobi: KIE
- KSDC (2000), 'Report of Sign Language Training of trainers workshop held at K.I.S.E'. Nairobi, Kenya (unpublished manual report).
- KSDC (1999), 'Sign Language In Deaf Education' (Unpublished Manual report).
- Wamae, G.I. and Kangethe, R. (2002) 'The Concept of Inclusive Education: Teacher Training and Language Acquisition of the Hearing Impaired'. (Conference Paper), Maseno University.
- Wamae, G.M.I. (2003) 'Effects of Sign Language Mode of Instruction on Acquisition of Affixes By Hearing Impaired Form Two Learners of English'. (Unpublished) M.A. Project, Kenyatta University.
- Yule, G. (1995), *The Study of Language*. New York: Scott, Foresman and Company.