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## **“Multilingualism and Language Policies in francophone and anglophone West and Central Africa”.**

### **Learning and Teaching a Foreign Language in a Multilingual setting: The case of German in Kenya**

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#### **The linguistic situation in Kenya**

The transmission of German as a foreign language in Kenya is heavily influenced by the prevailing linguistic situation which is multilingual in nature (Agoya 2001, Wachira 2008). The linguistic situation in Kenya is such that apart from the indigenous language(s) (there are around forty indigenous languages in Kenya and the learners possess one or more indigenous languages), English and more recently, Kiswahili, are the official languages.<sup>1</sup> English is also the main medium of instruction from upper primary school onwards. It is also a compulsory subject in primary and high schools. Moreover, English is also the language of communication in government, business, judiciary and industry (Agoya 2001:29). English is also viewed as the language of the elite in Kenya. Kiswahili, a Bantu language, is offered both in primary and secondary schools as an examinable subject. This means that German becomes the second foreign language for learners who choose to learn it in secondary school, after English.<sup>2</sup> These indigenous languages as well as the language of instruction (English) influence the way they acquire German as a Foreign Language. These learners are mainly either bilingual in English and Kiswahili or in some cases trilingual in the indigenous language, English and Kiswahili and it is very likely that they already bring with them not just the knowledge of other languages but also learning experiences and strategies as they start to learn German (Agoya 2001:1). However schools and teachers do not make use of the resource already present in the heads of the learners and this paper hopes to examine how this resource could be tapped into.

#### **German learning in Kenya**

German as an examinable subject was already introduced in the Kenyan public secondary school curriculum in 1980 (Laurien 1987)<sup>3</sup>. Originally only two secondary schools in Nairobi offered German as a subject. The Kenya High School in Nairobi introduced

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<sup>1</sup> Kiswahili was the national language in Kenya until 27.9.2010 when it was elevated to official language status together with English as stipulated in the new constitution.

<sup>2</sup> Other foreign languages taught in Kenya include French, Spanish and Hindi.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Böhm 2003:428

German in 1968 while Starehe Boys Centre in Nairobi introduced it in 1971.<sup>4</sup> Gradually more and more schools started offering German and by 1999 there were twenty five schools with German as a subject in Kenya (Böhm 2003: 427). To date German can be chosen as an L2 elective in sixty two secondary schools in Kenya.<sup>5</sup> It is mostly from pupils of these schools that the B.Ed. and B.A. German programmes at Kenyan universities draw their students. The reasons for learning German in Kenya range from study purposes to marrying a German and settling in Germany.

From my experience as a teacher of German for several years, I have observed that most learners of German in Kenya tend to express themselves in spoken and mainly in written German against the background of their competence in the English language. Their written German mirrors structures of English. This dominance of the English language tends to aid communication since English and German are similar in wide portions of the basic vocabulary as well as grammar. Moreover, German and English share a writing system and literary tradition since they are both western Germanic languages. For example English spelling is very similar to German spelling. In this case English acts as a true friend. This is especially so for cognates.<sup>6</sup> A good example here is *der Park* / 'park'. One should on the other hand beware of false friends. For example *das Gift* / is best translated as 'poison' and has nothing to do with *a present*. However in some cases there occurs negative transfer and this leads to errors. A good example is word order. Word order is dissimilar in both languages for example in subordinate clauses while gender marking of nouns that is present in German is non existent in English. English for the students of German is in this regard more like a foe.

## **The Role English language can play in learning German in Kenya**

A number of studies have been carried out on language transfer of foreign language learners' native as well as second language interference both in Kenya and on the international scene. Similar studies have been conducted with learners of German in Turkey (Oomen-Welke 2000 and Yücel 2005) and the United States of America (Born 1985) among other countries. Turkey and America are viewed here as models for Kenya since they have similar linguistic background. In these countries English is the main means of communication and it is always learnt before German. In Turkey, Oomen-Welke (2000) concluded that English aided the learning of German immensely and that the transfer from English to German had positive rather than negative effects. Yücel (2005) researched on students of German at the university level who had already learnt English as an L2 and were studying German as an L3. He observed that the fact that these students had learnt English could not be ignored in the teaching of German. Born studied the error types and negative transfer in compositions of third, fourth, and fifth semester German students. Her research design was cross-sectional and focused on areas believed to be major sources of errors and negative transfer from English into German (Born 1985: 246). Her study revealed that 30% to 50% of all errors could be attributed to negative transfer.

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<sup>4</sup> Agoya 2001: 86, 88

<sup>5</sup> Information from the The Goethe Institute Nairobi ( The German Cultural Centre 2010)

<sup>6</sup> Cognates are words that are similar in both languages.

Similar studies in Kenya (Agoya 2001, Wachira 2008) have also dealt with transfer phenomena of learners of German. Agoya (2001) studied how the transmission of German as a foreign language in Kenya is influenced by the prevailing linguistic situation which is multilingual in nature. She argues that the source of the linguistic transfers in spoken German is not always clear and that the influence could not be seen as coming from a specific language. She posits however that, as English – and to a lesser extent – Kiswahili is the main media of instruction in Kenya, transfer phenomena from these two languages during the acquisition of German are more likely to occur than from the mother tongue. Moreover the competence in English and Swahili are better developed and the mother tongue is used mainly in class situations. (Agoya 2001: 11).

Wachira (2008), one of the more recent transfer studies in Kenya, looked into the problems and strategies of translation and researched the influence of multilingualism in the process of translation. This research confirmed that English was the language of thought while the Kenyan learners of German translated Kiswahili texts into German. After being provided with a text in Kiswahili the Kenyan learners first translated it into English before translating it into German.

These studies bear witness that English can play a significant role in the learning of German as a foreign language here in Kenya. The knowledge of other languages and the learning experiences and strategies that are already provided for in the minds of these learners is what I consider as a resource when learning / teaching German. The fact that these learners of German in Kenya already have learnt English and speak other languages cannot be ignored. In my view, this significance is twofold. The aspects that are important for German studies in Kenya are sensitization of the learners about positive transfer on the one hand while on the other hand cautioning learners against negative transfer. The aim of this sensitization is to lead learners to discover the many learning bridges that can be helpful through the use of English in learning the German language. Construction of such a consciousness begins with vocabulary or meaning. This sensitization of learners alongside caution where the transfer is negative would go a long way in teaching German as a foreign language in Kenya. Furthermore, I hope that this can also aid teachers, teacher trainers and learners of German in Kenya in their daily teaching engagement in the classroom. This would thus help in pointing out not only the didactic tools that teachers could use but also point out that, in a way, these didactic tools are provided for “in” the minds of their learners.

This idea of language transfer is not new. Odlin (1989) acknowledged the role of language transfer and hoped that more teachers and teacher trainers would begin to think of ways of making use of transfer research in the classroom. Ellis (1985) reinterpreted ‘interference’ as ‘intercession’ and saw in it a strategy for communicating when there were insufficient L2 resources (Ellis 1985: 40). Thus the influence of English on the acquisition of German can be explored as a resource rather than as interference.

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