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Language Learning Catastrophe? Crisis and Impediments in the Free Primary Education (FPE) in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a detailed, informative and insightful account of the introduction of the Free Primary Education (FPE) in Kenya. It demonstrates how the implementation was done has a matter of political expediency rather than a well thought out plan. Obsessed with this political undercurrents was the need of those in the higher echelons to persuade the electorate to see the benefits of the FPE while ignoring and neglecting long term repercussions of the FPE. In view of the performance in languages in Kenyan examinations and given the important role of the teachers in teaching writing skills, this paper therefore intends to investigate how teachers' pedagogical competencies are affected by the FPE. The paper seeks to establish whether the FPE is an impediment to Language learning in primary schools which is subsequently cascaded to secondary and university level. The primary concern of this paper is to however bring out the challenges of language learning in implementing the FPE as a Millennium Development Goal.

In the case of Kenya, the consequence of such unplanned system has been poor quality education as a result of overcrowding, lack of teachers, socio-cultural challenges and inadequate learning materials. The inefficient administration at the Ministry of Education Science and Technology, which attempts to deal with problems relating to funding and infrastructure in an ad hoc manner, only serves to worsen the situation rather than amend/implement it. In addressing these issues, language teaching has been affected. High enrolment rates, improper language policy, lack of research and technology geared towards language teaching, and lack of language facilities in schools are factors affecting language teaching.

Keywords: Free Primary Education (FPE), Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MOEST) Millennium Development goal (MDGs), Language Learning.

Introduction

The Kenya government policy to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) has to be seen within developments in the wider international context. In recent years a new awareness of the differences between a number of countries in the South and the North in the field of research has become much more widespread when it comes to generating knowledge in a context of globalization. UNESCO has undertaken to narrow this gap by bringing researchers from the North and South together on the same team so as to prevent researchers from the North from conceptualizing all research on the basis of their own experience and their cultural referents. On to this first political objective is grafted a second, which acknowledges the globalization of economic movements and their repercussions on social, economic and cultural transformations, together with the emergence of themes such as the environment or drugs which form part of this new representation of the global village. The initiative directly affects the generation of scientific knowledge and the conditions for its construction.

In East Africa, for instance, since the achievement of independence in 1963, the government and the people of Kenya have been committed to expanding the education system to enable greater participation. This has been in response to a number of concerns. Among the main concerns have been the desire to combat ignorance, disease and poverty; and the belief that every Kenyan child has the right of access to basic welfare provisions, including education, and that the government has the obligation to provide its citizens with the opportunity to take part fully in the socio-economic and political development of the country and to attain a decent standard of living. Education has also been seen as a fundamental factor for human capital development. However, efforts to expand English language teaching have not been reflected on and even the various policy documents and development plans have overlooked the fact that language teaching is key in developments geared towards education.

The United Nations has put in place guidelines to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) which have to be seen within developments in the wider international context. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, declared that “everyone has a right to education.” The World Conference on Education for All (EFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, sparked off a new impetus towards basic education especially with its so-called vision and renewed commitment. It noted,

“[T]hat to serve the basic needs for all requires more than a recommitment to basic education as now exists. What is needed is an expanded vision that surpasses resource levels, institutional structures, curricula and conventional delivery systems, while building on the best in the practices.”ⁱ

The Amman Mid-Decade Review of Education for All (1996) reaffirmed the commitment to the Jomtien resolutions. It observed that the provision of basic education has remained elusive in many less industrialized countries.

This was said to be particularly so in Africa, where ethnic tensions and conflicts have displaced many households, thus denying children opportunities of going to school. The Dakar Conference of 2000

reviewed developments in achieving UPE in the African continent. It set as one of the EFA goals “Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary Education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015” This was further endorsed by the so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Among other things they set targets “to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.”ⁱⁱ

Within this broad policy framework, since independence in 1963, the expansion of learning institutions has been one of the greatest achievements in the education sector. Kenya has achieved an impressive increase in adult literacy. The achievements in literacy have reflected the country’s impressive progress in expanding access to education during the last four decades largely by establishing a comprehensive network of schools throughout the country. The substantial expansion of education has generally resulted in an increased participation by groups that previously had little or no access to schooling. Enrolment of a greater percentage of girls and indeed the attainment of Universal Primary Education (UPE) has been the long-term objective in the primary education sub-sector. However, language learning has been ignored making it difficult to implement the curriculum. Focus has been developing science and technology, with government investing billions of shillings and seeking partnership from abroad to enhance sciences whilst overlooking languages. The recent development of the Japan based Strengthening Mathematics and Science for Secondary School Education (SMASSE) has registered a growth in the sciences and technology. But to date no similar program has been developed for languages in spite of poor performance amongst students.

In this paper an attempt is made to examine the free primary education and its impact on language learning.

Free Primary Education sounds commendable as a means of cushioning children from poor socio-economic backgrounds from failing to participate in education or dropping out of school, as well as being determinative of efforts to achieve UPE and EFA. However, it is argued that the numerous problems that have bedeviled the implementation of the interventions, and the fact that the cost of it is beyond the current education budget allocation, casts very serious doubts on the viability of the current FPE experiment. In looking at language learning, the high enrolments rates have led to overcrowding in class rooms. Inadequate learning materials and resources, inadequate teaching staff, and skilled teachers have affected language learning. These indications point to the fact that the government has failed to pay special attention to language learning.

Background of Language policy in Kenya

Language policy in Kenya is based on the colonial language policy, following the scramble for European powers to the end of the 19th century. These impacts on the post-colonial language policy in Kenya. English language has hegemonic and divisionary tendencies, between the elite and the rest of the masses. Barely quarter of the Kenyan population can adequately use English, yet it remains the official language of communication and the medium of instruction in the education system, unlike Kiswahili. (Ogechi and Ogechi, 2009). Though the status quo has remained, all is not well on the ground. The

government has continued to develop education, paying attention to science and technology while overlooking the individual needs pertaining to language.

During the introduction of colonial education, Bishop Steere, Reverend Krapf and Father Saclex, spearheaded the discussions on language issue in education in the Conference of United Missionaries in 1909. It was agreed that Mother tongue would be the medium of instruction in the first three classes in primary school, Kiswahili for middle classes and English was to be used in the rest of the classes till university. (Gorman, 1974). This was until the 20s when colonialists changed tact. It was realized that the system interfered with the goal of the colonialists to maintain menial work force and not produce white collar work force. (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1996). There had to be a distinction between the master and the subject through linguistic distance. However, the Africans had already discovered that English as language has many advantages and it was the gateway to white collar jobs.

The Phelps-Stoke Commission in 1924 recommended mother tongues be taught in early primary classes, and English be taught from upper primary to the university. Between 1950-51, the education Department Reports said it was inappropriate to teach three languages at primary school. Beecher's 1949, Binn's 1952, and Drogheda Commission 1952 recommended English for lower primary alongside mother tongue. (Gorman, 1974). Kiswahili was dropped strategically to stall freedom fighting. (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998). The Prator-Hutasoit Commission later endorsed English as the only language of instruction in all school levels. With this regard English was supported at the expense of local language. To date English is still the most favoured language yet no developmental efforts has been made to suit individual need for the language. And Kiswahili suffers the same fate.

After independence, the colonial education system was adopted and the MOE made a few changes with regard to language policy. Kiswahili became an optional subject; English was the language of instruction. (Ominde, 1964). From the Ominde Commission English was recommended from lower to higher education.

In 1981, Mackay Commission recommended 8 years of primary, 4 years of secondary and 4 years of university education. English remained a language of instruction, and Kiswahili became a compulsory subject both in primary and secondary education, and mother tongues be used in lower grades of primary schools. (Njoroge, 1991). To date the government has no specific programme to enhance the teaching of language. Since the inception of the Free Primary Education, in the 1970s to date, little had been done to facilitate proper teaching of language. The private sector has taken over this role. Language teachers have resorted to go for private seminars organized by private companies to enhance their skills. However, few schools are able to afford the exorbitant fees charged at the seminars.

Methods of teaching language

A language teaching method is explained by Yalden (1987) as a plan for presenting the language materials to be learned and should be based upon an approach. In order to translate an approach into a method an instructional system, must be designed, considering the objectives of the teaching/ learning, selection of the content and organization of the types of tasks to be performed and the roles of the

students and the teachers. Richards and Roggers (1986) on the other hand define a method as a way of teaching a language which is based on systematic principles and procedures.

Yalden (1987) further states that over the years teachers of language have witnessed a multiple of methods based on a variety of approaches. Some of these methods, for example, Direct method, Grammar Translation method, Audio-lingual method, the Audio-visual structuro-Global methods are well known names in the history of language teaching. Yalden, however, states that research carried out in the 1960's and 1970's on the use of these methods by Scheper and Wertheimer (1964) and Smith (1970) indicated that the results obtained by teachers as well as learners were not satisfactory. This is because it was observed that students could produce sentences in a lesson but could not use them appropriately when genuinely communicating outside of the classroom. This therefore indicated that students may know the rules of linguistic usage but be unable to use the language.

In developing communicative competence, Suciu and Mata (2013) have stated that basic pedagogical competencies which are internationally, recognized, conduct student centered teaching process. They further suggest that for communicative learner centered instructions the teacher has to provide appropriate input. This is when the teacher exposes the students to teacher talk, listening activities, reading passages and the language heard and read outside of class. Input gives learners the materials they need to develop their ability to use language on their own. The teacher's task therefore is to present content and learning activities that provide opportunities for learners to practice these skills for interpersonal language use in both formal and informal situations.

The traditional approach is based on the assumption that the creative aspects of the writing process cannot be taught and are limited to the conventions and mechanics of discourse. It only includes the teaching of grammar and the correct choice of vocabulary. In this approach students see writing as tedious and a burden since they are not given any direction. They are also not interested in what they write because they are not consulted in the choice of the topic and the audience. The teacher does not take time to find out whether they are familiar with the topic or not. Lastly there is delayed feedback.

The modern approach is also referred to as the process-oriented approach to writing. It combines communicative approach and the process approach and is based on the assumptions that; people write to communicate to readers and to accomplish specific purposes.

The Free Primary Education Declaration of the 1970s

According to Otach, (2008) "before 1960, free and universal primary education had not been extended to African children in any of the East African British colonies, racial discrimination in primary education was still intact". In the 1963 elections, when the Kenya African National Union (KANU) became the ruling party, it published a manifesto entitled, What a KANU Government offers you. This manifesto committed the party to offering a minimum of seven years of free primary education. In the 1969 election manifesto the party again re-echoed its commitment to providing seven years of free primary education. It was emphasized that it was the KANU Government's guiding principle to give priority in education programmes to areas which were neglected during the colonial rule so that every Kenyan could share fully both in the process of nation building and in enjoying the fruits of government labour. In the more sparsely populated areas, the government pledged to continue

its programme of building primary and secondary schools so that every child in those districts which had a low-average enrolment would get an opportunity to attend school. The government fees remission programme was to be continued in favour of these areas. The first step towards free primary education was in 1971 (Ngaroga, 2001); this was when President Jomo Kenyatta abrogated tuition fees for the economically marginal districts in the country. In 1971, a presidential decree abolished tuition fees for the districts with unfavourable geographical conditions since these were said to make the populations in these areas poor. These included such areas as North-Eastern Province, the districts of Marsabit, Isiolo and Samburu in Rift Valley Province; Turkana, West Pokot, Baringo, Narok, Elgeyo-Marakwet and Olkejuado in Rift Valley Province, as well as Tana River and Lamu in Coast Province.ⁱⁱⁱ

A second presidential decree on 12 December 1973 during the celebration of the so-called “Ten Great Years of Independence” claimed to have brought the country close to achieving “universal free primary education.” The directive provided free primary education for children in standards I-IV in all districts of the country. It went further and provided a uniform fee structure for those in standards V-VII in the whole country. This fee was Ksh 60/- per child per annum. Subsequent directives went further and abolished school fees in primary education. In 1976 the Gachathi Report recommended an extension of the waiver of fees to the full seven years of primary education by 1980, (UNICEF & World Bank, 2009). Despite the existence of free primary education by 1980, the schools witnessed many challenges that eventually contributed to its failure and the introduction of levies in primary schools.

The aim of the free primary education program was to provide more school opportunities, especially for the poor communities. The argument was that the payment of school fees tended to prevent a large proportion of the children from attending school. The presidential decree providing free education in the early classes was one of the most dramatic political pronouncements of the Kenyatta era since it took planners and the public unaware. The financial implications as well as the various methods for its introduction were not subjected to close scrutiny. Besides language teaching which at the time was emphasized on Kiswahili as the national language and English as the official language were not part of the plan to expand and provide education. The government focused more on expanding education opportunities without inputting plans to effective language learning. In January 1974, the Ministry of Education had to rethink its priorities in order to cope with the staggering rise of pupil enrolment. Enrolment in standard one rose by a million above the estimated figure of about 400,000. The total enrolment figure for standards one to six increased from 1.8 million in 1973 to nearly 2.8 million in January 1974.^{iv}

At the time of the abolition of school fees no counter measures were announced about how to replace the lost revenue. Initially, primary schools were at a loss as to what they could do about this lost revenue, and after failing to get clear directives, school management committees resorted to raising school revenue under the guise of a “building levy.” Ostensibly this was aimed at putting up new facilities. With the enlarged enrolment, a country-wide building programme had to be launched to cope with extra classes. Many schools were not aware of the new places needed. In some schools as many as five extra streams came into being. The building levy varied from one district to another, but in most cases, it

turned out to be higher than the school fees charged prior to the decree. This frustrated many parents who had little alternative but to withdraw their children. In looking at language learning at the time, very little of these efforts were geared towards expanding and developing language skills. Schools boast of libraries that stock quite a number of books but few are related to language learning, some purported to be existing has little to do with language learning in the Kenyan context.

Initially, in most districts, except those in the ASAL (Arid and Semi-Arid Lands), enrolments almost doubled showing a radical change during the 1973-74 period. After that the situation reverted to what it had been before. It was estimated that around one to two million school age children did not continue attending school after the decree. The explanation was that many of the children who had enrolled dropped out, following the introduction of the building levy. Enrolments, even in districts that had experienced large infusions of new children, reverted to the situation before 1973.

The high drops out rates were a response, not only to the very high levies, but also to the quality of education that was being offered following the government intervention. As a result of high enrolments, there was overcrowding in classes and the supply of teaching and learning materials underwent a severe strain. Since the early 1970s their distribution had been centralized through the Kenya Equipment Scheme; it now became difficult to dispatch the necessary materials and equipment to most of the primary schools. Distribution problems were compounded by the variety of the topography and the long distances. Consequently, many of the schools went without basic teaching and learning materials for a greater part of 1974.

With regard to the teaching force, at the time of the pronouncement, the country was already short of properly trained teachers. In 1973, the teaching force stood at 56,000 teachers, out of whom 12,600 were professionally unqualified. In 1974, an additional 25,000 teachers were needed for the new classes. By 1975, the number of unqualified teachers stood at 40,000, out of a teaching force of 90,000 teachers. With such a teaching environment, high dropout rates in school, primary education became inevitable. The newly instituted building fund, which was meant to be a purely spontaneous reaction to an emergency, became a permanent feature. Beyond the recruitment of more unqualified teachers, the government played a very minor role in the implementation of “free primary education.” If anything, it was quite satisfied that school committees had successfully implemented the programme with minimal cost on its part. Overall, the effect of government intervention in primary education and the implications arising out of it made primary education much more expensive than before.^v

The Free Primary Education Intervention of 2003

During the 2002 general elections, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) made the provision of free primary education as part of its election manifesto. Following its victory, on January 6, 2003 the Minister for Education Science and Technology (MoEST) launched the Free Primary Education (FPE) to fulfill NARC’s election pledge. Fees and levies for tuition in primary school were abolished as the government and development partners were to meet the cost of basic teaching and learning materials as

well as wages for critical non-teaching staff and co-curricular activities. The government and development partners were to pay Kshs. 1,020 for each primary child in that year. The FPE did not require parents and communities to build new schools, but they were to refurbish and use existing facilities such as community and religious buildings. If they wished to charge additional levies, school heads and committees had to obtain approval from the MoEST. This request had to be sent to the District Education Board by the Area Education Officer, after a consensus among parents through the Provincial Director of Education, a fairly lengthy and tedious process.^{vi}

Before the NARC pronouncement the number of primary schools in the country had increased steadily from 14,864 in 1990 to 18,901 in 2001/2 representing a 27.2% increase. Enrolment in absolute terms had also gone up from 5,392,319 to 6,314,726, being a 17.1% rise over the same period. The percentage of girls' enrolment also increased in the same period to 49.3%, implying that gender parity in enrolment in primary schools at the national level had nearly been achieved. Primary school Net Enrolment Ratios (NERs), however, showed a very disturbing picture in the North Eastern Province (mainly inhabited by pastoralist communities) where boys constituted 16.5% and girls 9.8%, with an average of 13.4% for the province.

Following the NARC intervention in January 2003, it was estimated that the NER rose from around 6,314,726 to 7,614,326 by the end of the year, representing a 22.3% increase nationally. It was also estimated that another 3 million children were not enrolled in school. Despite the various logistical problems that seem to be hampering a successful implementation of the FPE, the policy sounds commendable as it has meant cushioning children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, especially girls from failing to participate in primary education or dropping out of school due to lack of fees and other school levies. Overall, the policy intervention could prove determinative in the efforts to achieve UPE and EFA.

However, while free primary Education has increased participation, it has at the same time created considerable problems especially for language teaching. It has exacerbated the problem of teaching and learning facilities. As a result of the high influx of new pupils, classrooms are congested. Many of the preliminary surveys seem to show that the existing facilities make a mockery of the free education programme which cannot meet individual needs. Many school management committees feel that they are seriously constrained to improve the state of learning facilities due to the government's ban on school levies. At the same time, conditions laid down to request for concessions to institute levies are so cumbersome that they hesitate to embark on the process.^{vii}

As a result of the free primary education, the situation of the teaching force in most of the districts is generally bad. Teachers complain of increased pupil teacher ratios. Many primary schools are understaffed as a result of the free primary education programme. This does not augur well for the quality of education delivered especially for language learning. Many school management committees are of the opinion that as a result on the ban of levies, they are unable to recruit extra teachers through the PTAs and this has also seriously affected the pre-school units.

Ironically, these problems contribute directly to the teaching of language. (the number of teaching lessons in a week) and the number of students and kind of attention required to boost education. They have also seriously affected the inflow of pupils in primary English language in the second year of FPE implementation. Districts that registered over 20% increase in enrolment in 2003, hardly recorded more than 5% of standard one enrolment this year. Most of the logistical problems bedeviling the implementation of free primary education intervention, such as lack of facilities and teachers, are well known to the education administrators in the country. But due to the “culture of fear and silence” inculcated by the former KANU regime, coupled by an inept administration at the MoEST headquarters, the official rhetoric is that the FPE is working smoothly.

Apart from the logistical problems in the implementation of FPE, the key question remains: is the programme sustainable? In the 2003/04 financial year, the government increased its education budget by 17.4% to Kshs.79.4 billion, with over Kshs. 7.6 billion specifically allocated to the FPE programme. The donor community, which received the FPE policy with high enthusiasm, was quick to assist the government. The World Bank, for example, gave a grant of Kshs. 3.7 billion, while the British government through the Department for International Development gave Kshs. 1.6 billion. Other donors included the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Kshs 1.2 billion, the Swedish government, Kshs. 430 million and UNICEF Kshs. 250 million.^{viii} It goes without saying that such donor funding is usually temporary. A good number of these funds has gone to improving science and technology and almost nothing for the improving language learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the implementation of FPE, like similar interventions by previous governments. The study finds that this task has been a matter of political expediency rather than a well thought out and planned reform. The NARC government, like its predecessors, did not carry out a situation analysis prior to the implementation of FPE. The consequence: poor quality education as a result of overcrowding, lack of teachers and of learning materials. The inefficient administration at the MoEST, which attempts to deal with problems relating to funding and infrastructure in an ad hoc manner, only serves to exacerbate the situation. With these challenges, similar to those faced by previous governments, the attainment of UPE will continue to be illusionary.

The study concludes that there is need to focus on implementing language learning as part of the development programmes for schools. Similar programmes such as CEMASTEVA should be commenced to enhance the teaching of language in schools. Furthermore, the paper suggests that the government should fund researches, teacher training and seminars to enhance the teaching of languages.

In addition, facilities such as language laboratories will also go a long way in developing language skills especially for the pre primary goers. Farrant, (2004) and Gowers, Philips and Walters (1995) agree that use of teaching/learning resources make a lesson more interesting and effective. They further state that, though schools vary in the number and types of resources available to the teachers, there are many ways that teachers can make the required resources available. Some of the resources a language teacher can use according to Farrant (2004) and Gowers and Philips (1995) are like: - chalkboard, over head projector, wall charts, pictures, maps, models, real objects, immediate environment, and artifacts.

Other important resources are also like published materials such as course books, reference books, and other print materials like newspapers, journals and magazines. Language teachers can also make use of cassette recorders, radio, video, films, photo copier and computers. Even if schools will not have most of these resources, almost all schools will have some form of chalkboards which as Farrant (2004) and Gower and Philips (1995) state, is the most common and useful teaching resource. In order to obtain the maximum effect of chalkboard and any other teaching resource, in teaching and learning, the teacher has to organize well on how to use it while presenting the content.

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