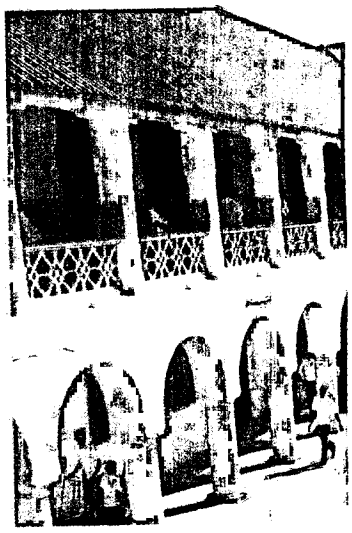
LANGUAGE BARRIER English, irrelevant to the majority of the population who live in rural areas, has remained the language used to teach all s



Above: Halle Selasie School students return to their classes after lunch.It is one of the popular schools in Zanzibar.

Right. Ahmed Ben Bela Secondary School teachers pose for a photograph

Students show full participation during Kiswahili lesson. However, most of them fail to participate in a meaningful way when the lesson is taught in English. PHOTO | FILE

Experts warn: Education for all, but in whose language?

In the words of a rural teacher, teaching a child in English is like 'teaching a dead stone'. Children simply do not understand what is being said, and therefore cannot participate in a meaningful way.

By Isla Gilmore
The Citizen Correspondent

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The percent of Form Four leavers who passed the exam with Divisions 1-3 in 2010

Dar es Salaam. The world commemorated the day of the African Child last week, and this year Tanzania celebrates 50 years of independence. It's a good time to think about what the future looks like for Tanzania's children, who make up 50 per cent of the population. Many of them over the coming years will hope to benefit from a fast-expanding secondary school sector. But will they benefit?

Birgit Brock-Utne, a Norwegian professor who has done extensive research on education for all, aid to the education sector, and on the language of instruction issue in sub-Saharan Africa asks: Education for all – in whose language?

Coming from Norway and working as a professor at the University of Dar es Salaam, doing student teacher supervision in secondary schools, she was struck by the immense learning difficulties students had when they studied in a language neither they nor their teachers mastered well. Her own country Norway has less than five million inhabitants but uses Norwegian as the language of instruction through to university. The Finns use Finnish, the Greek use Greek, the Germans use German and so on, including the 300,000 inhabitants of Iceland who use Icelandic through the entire educational system including university.

In all of these countries they also learn English as a subject, and the majority speak it well. The Nigerian linguist Ayo Bamgbose says "Outside Africa no one questions why the languages of smaller populations in Europe should be used as medium of instruction up to and including university level."

Since Tanzania's independence this issue has been a widely debated, with the government making efforts on at least two occasions in the 1980s and 1990s to change the language of instruction at secondary school and above to the language that almost all Tanzanians know well – Kiswahili. However, for various reasons, this never happened. English, a European language and irrelevant to the majority of the population who live in rural areas, has remained the language used to teach all subjects, except Kiswahili, in secondary schools and universities.

So what's the problem?

Anyone who has spent any time in a Tanzanian secondary school will know the answer. In the words of a rural teacher, teaching a child in English is like "teaching a dead stone". Children simply do not understand what is being said, and therefore cannot participate in a meaningful way. But they will learn, people say, isn't that like any language immersion school programme? Well, apparently not according to scholars on the topic, such as Brock-Utne, Dr. Martha Qorro, and Dr. Azaveli Lwaitama; the latter two are senior lecturers in English language and linguistics at the University of Dar es Salaam. They say that Tanzanian children struggle to learn English because of the context in which it is taught. Children are being forced to speak a language that nobody in their community speaks, and which is irrelevant to their lives. Dr. Qorro says that children cram for exams and by the next year they won't remember what they learnt. They say that keeping this policy is doing exactly the opposite to what education is designed to do – to educate. In fact, they say that it's a waste of resources, and the opposite of poverty reduction.

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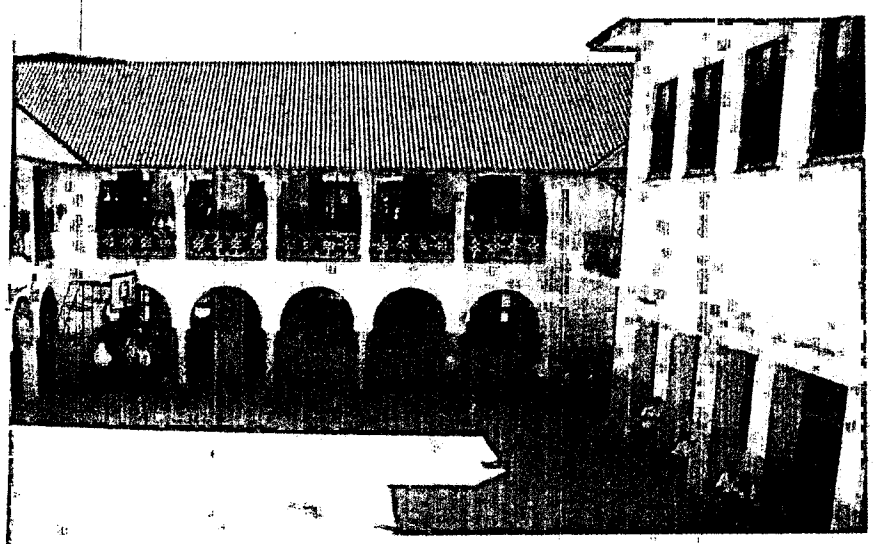

"Outside Africa no one questions why the languages of smaller populations in Europe should be used as medium of instruction up to and including university level."
AYO BAMGBOSE, NIGERIAN LINGUIST

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There is an abrupt change of language between primary and secondary school from Kiswahili to English, which is a very unusual system. Not only is the learning pattern halted, it is practically reversed, as children struggle to repeat English words used to describe their subjects, rather than internalising the contents; and as Kiswahili is reduced to a subject. This is evident, as many students and graduates cannot express themselves in English, failing exams in topics such as Tanzanian history, which they could most likely explain perfectly well in Kiswahili.

Any linguist will tell you that children learn better in a language they know well. Foreign languages are best taught as subjects – like physics or maths. And it's much better when the child has developed a thorough understanding of their own language. As Kiswahili is a second or third language to most Tanzanians, it's debatable whether they have grasped it by the time they switch to English. According to a 2010 report by Uwezo 'Are our Children Learning? many children in primary school cannot read or write in Kiswahili to the level required of their age group.

English is not a compulsory subject at all teacher training colleges for teachers of other subjects, and teachers are not adequately tested for their proficiency (although this is planned for). Teachers' low level of English proficiency negatively affects the learning process as they struggle to find the right words and often switch to Kiswahili to explain things. It is a vicious cycle; teachers are a product of poor quality English instruction and then they go on to teach more broken English to the next generation. This is not a criticism of diligent teachers. It is not their fault.

This begs the question, what is Tanzania looking for? People who can speak a few words of English but who know little about how to solve the problems their communities face, or people who have understood fully the contents of their subjects and who will put this learning to good use? Education and the accumulation of human capital should be about capabilities. HakiElimu lists the most basic of capabilities: the ability to read and write fluently; to comprehend, analyse, ask questions and think critically; be creative, innovate, and solve problems. HakiElimu believes that perhaps the most important question to ask of the education system is 'what are its students able to do?'

Let's look at what students are able to do. In 2010 only 11 per cent of Form 4 leavers passed the leaving exam with Divisions 1–3, an incredible loss to Tanzania, and frankly a waste of precious resources. Kiswahili results weren't great either, the only subject taught in Kiswahili, which points to a quality issue over all. Dr. Qorro states "of coürse the Kiswahili results are bad; children are punished for speaking it in school". This punishment is perhaps one of the major differences between positive language immersion and what we see in Tanzanian schools.

As they have not been informed otherwise, parents sadly believe it's a good thing that learning English in any way possible is the only way to 'upward mobility and attainment of a better life', in the words of Brock-Utne. At a recent seminar at the World Bank on the topic, one respondent said: "It doesn't matter what language you learn in, it's about quality of education". This is true to an extent; a good teacher can get great results in most things, but it depends on the context and relevance of the subject. Tanzania does not have the resources to train every teacher of every school in excellent English to achieve this quality. That being the case, it does not serve the development of the people, of whom 80 per cent live in rural areas and will barely speak a word of English after they graduate. Something is missing from this conversation – human rights: the right to education, and language rights. Why should Tanzanian children, many who already speak two or more Bantu languages, have to learn all their subjects in English, to the detriment of their cognitive development?

Tanzania is one of few African countries with a unifying language which is not foreign. If Kiswahili has not yet developed to its full capacity, it is because the English in education and law prevents it from doing so.

Is it too late to salvage Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in schools and potentially higher education? Once only available to the elite and with good quality teaching, English has crept in at all levels of the Tanzanian school system – primary and even pre-primary private schools can now legally choose to teach and test in English. Sadly the quality has not remained.

Zanzibar is introducing English as the medium of instruction in Standard 5. One European linguist, who's dedicating her PhD to the policy change, has called it "disastrous". It remains to be seen what will happen.

One thing's for sure, one consistent language would serve children best from day one to university, with no abrupt break in the middle. Once that conclusion has been made, there is a logical choice between the languages.

Funding primary and secondary education in English to any level of quality is not feasible today, and could potentially disconnect children from their communities. It will also mean that some day in the future, our grandchildren will find themselves in a Tanzania with little command of its own language. Tanzania will no longer be the home of Kiswahili, the language of independence, of unity.

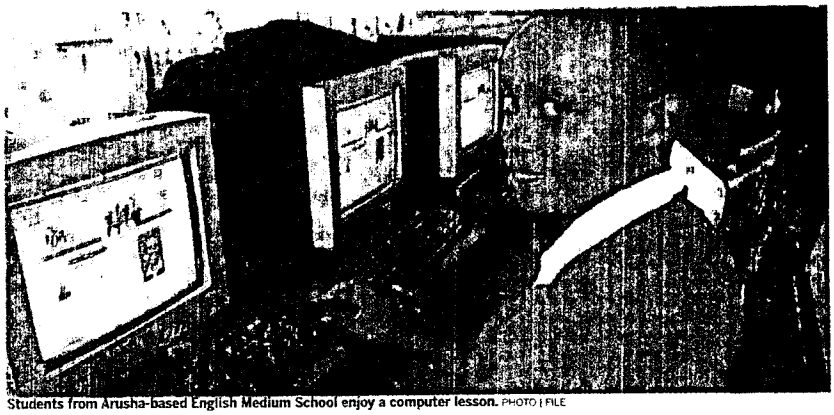
A happier solution would be for donors to support the government to deliver excellent English language training to teachers of English, who can then teach quality English as a subject in secondary schools. Children should learn their other subjects in Kiswahili, be able to interact in their classes, and feel confident and encouraged by their progress. This could lead to improved learning and exam results, and it's highly likely that English proficiency would improve as well, as this is how the majority of the world does it.

It is called a pro-poor policy: A Tanzania where Tanzanians are supported to learn and develop competencies to fill the devastating human resources gap from which the country currently suffers. On a national and individual level Tanzanians can then look forward to a future where an educated population can participate in a developed domestic and global market. It would most likely be more cost effective, and have a higher return on investment.

Isn't that what economists are looking for?

It may take a while, and it may be expensive to start, but all major programmes have high start up costs. The choice is up to Tanzania and those who claim to be stakeholders in its development. With planned secondary expansion, decision makers need to think finally about the effect of language on millions of children and the future of Tanzania. A move in the right direction would be, at the very least and even very small scale, to test it.

Mapinduzi Primary School pupils return home after class. PHOTO | FILE



Students from Arusha-based English Medium School enjoy a computer lesson. PHOTO | FILE