

# Student Mother Tongue Usage, Preference, and Attitudes in Bungoma County, Kenya

by

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## Abstract

This paper presents and discusses results of a language survey carried out at Mihuu Secondary School in the Bungoma County of western Kenya. It is shown that although students have diverse linguistic backgrounds, language use patterns tend to converge as they tend to use Kiswahili and English to communicate with their friends at school and others in society. Hence, it was found that students were proficient in English, but their mother tongue did not seem to be as secure as has often been assumed, and thus, a significant number of students were not proficient in the mother tongue, and the younger the student, the less likely they are to be proficient in the mother tongue. Therefore, it is argued that inter-ethnic marriages, linguistic heterogeneity, and Kenya's current language policy are responsible for this trend.

## Introduction

This paper presents and discusses the results of a survey of Mihuu secondary school students' linguistic backgrounds, language use patterns, proficiency in major languages in their repertoire and environment, self-assessment of effectiveness of use of English as language of instruction, and general language preferences. One of the key findings of the survey is that most students are confident about their proficiency in Kiswahili and English. This being the case, they mostly use Kiswahili to communicate with their friends; they have no problem understanding lessons that are presented in English (which is the mandated language of instruction); and they chose Kiswahili and English as their preferred languages over their mother tongues.

This survey arose out of my wish to find out if students' opinions on language of instruction and self-assessment of their linguistic abilities align with the popular desire by African linguists, language policy scholars and educators to replace English (and other European languages) with indigenous African languages as language of instruction.

Preference of indigenous African languages by African linguists, language scholars and educators is grounded in research and UNESCO's mother tongue principal. As noted in Mutasa (2006) and Chumbow (2005), UNESCO's mother tongue education principle was adopted 1953. This principle states that the use of the child's 'mother tongue' as a medium of instruction in the school system has significant advantages over the use of an exoglossic or foreign language, where 'mother tongue' is defined as 'the language in which the child first learns to express his ideas about himself and the world in which he lives' (UNESCO 1953, as quoted in Chumbow 2005:170).

Afolayan's (1976) Six Year Primary Project also provide support for the desirability of using indigenous African languages as languages of instruction. This six-year primary project found that students who received instruction in Yoruba language and learned English as a subject performed better in examinations at the end of the project. Not only that, students in the project performed better in English exams and had higher proficiency levels in English than students who received instruction in English starting from first grade.

Because of the UNESCO mother tongue education principle and success of experiments and projects such as the Six Year Primary Project, many language policy experts and educators support use of a student's mother tongue or first language for instruction in elementary and even in secondary school. I am an ardent supporter of this policy proposal.

It is an attractive policy proposal, but there is need for caution especially for secondary schools. The fact that the 'English for instruction' policy has been in operation since the late 1950s in many Anglophone African countries such as Kenya, makes it imperative to understand students' attitudes towards English and other languages, their proficiency levels in English and other languages, and their thinking about use of English as the language of instruction. This is very important – first, because it can provide us with evidence needed to support replacing English with African languages as language of instruction (if it is found that students implicate English in learning difficulties and would prefer use of African languages instead). And secondly, because implementation of policy would greatly benefit from a clear understanding of students' (and their parents') language attitudes. As Mutasa (2006) rightly observes, it is very important to understand perception and language attitudes before implementation of a language policy. Without this understanding, successful policy implementation would be very difficult if not impossible.

Students' language of instruction preferences might not be the best and reliable factor to consider in policy formulation, but it is worth knowing and understanding what students' thoughts are. It might be possible to incorporate some of their thinking into new updated and improved language policies. But even if this were not possible, what students say can provide pointers to what needs to be done for example to improve attitudes towards languages in their repertoire and their thinking about English and their own languages.

It is unfortunate that in the existing literature, there is a scarcity of work that provide data about students' perception and self-assessment of linguistic abilities, language use patterns, language of instruction preferences and attitudes. This study set out to contribute to filling this gap.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 is the introduction, section 2 is the description of the survey and location of the survey, section 3 presents data and brief commentary, section 4 is the discussion and section 5 is the conclusion.

## **The Survey**

The research survey presented and discussed in this paper was carried out from June 2016 to August 2016 at Mihuu Secondary School. Mihuu is a boys and girls (mixed) secondary school in Bungoma East, Bungoma County, Western Kenya. It is about three kilometers to the East of Webuye town. It is a rural school and people who live around the school are predominantly farmers. They grow sugarcane, maize, beans, bananas, vegetables etc. and they also raise livestock (mostly cows) and poultry. They are predominantly Tachoni, but there is a sizeable population of Bukusu as well. Both the Tachoni and Bukusu are sub-groups of Luhya and their languages (Lutachoni and Lubukusu) are mutually intelligible.

Mihuu Secondary School has an approximate population of 320 students spread out evenly in four grades: Form one, Form two, Form three and Form four, with each grade having two streams (a boys' stream and a girls' stream). To illustrate, Form one has two streams: the boys stream and the girls stream. The Form one boys stream has approximately forty students, and the Form one girls stream also has approximately forty students. Form two, Form three and Form four are organized in the same way.

Some students at the Mihuu Secondary School are borders while others are day scholars. The borders live in dormitories at school while day scholars commute to their homes every school day.

Because of time constraints (mainly due students' busy scheduling), we were only able to survey two streams: Form two girls' stream (thirty three students) and Form four boys' stream (forty students). A self-administered questionnaire was used.

To understand the participants' linguistic background, we asked them to tell us what their mother tongue is (by writing it in the provided space on the questionnaire).

The Form two students in the survey named the following as their mother tongue:

Tachoni (Lutachoni): 4/33 (12.12%)	Bukusu (Lubukusu): 13/33 (39.39%)
Swahili (Kiswahili): 3/33 (9.09%)	Maragoli (Logooli): 1/33 (3.03%)
Luo (Dholuo): 2/33 (6.06%)	Kabras (Lukabresi): 1/33 (3.03%)
Marama (Lumarama): 1/33 (3.03%)	Teso (Ateso): 2/33 (6.06%)
Luyia: 2/33 (6.06%)	No answer: 4/33 (12.12%)

The Form four students in the survey named the following as their mother tongue:

Bukusu (Lubukusu): 14/40 (35%)	Kinyala (Lunyala): 1/40 (2.5%)
Tachoni (Lutachoni): 19/40 (47.5%)	Kabras (Lukabresi): 2/40 (5%)
Luo (Dholuo): 2/40 (5%)	Swahili (Kiswahili): 1/40 (2.5%)
Kinyala (Lunyala): 1/40 (2.5%)	

Thus the most common mother tongue is Lubukusu for Form two students and Lutachoni for Form four students. This is not surprising, considering the fact that communities surrounding the school are predominantly Tachoni, though the Bukusu are also well represented.

In the survey, we were interested in knowing which languages the students spoke at home and at school, and whether they understood lessons that are presented in English (since English is the language of instruction). We were also interested in finding out what their language preferences are and whether they think using Kiswahili and mother tongue would make learning easier.

We gave students a self-administered questionnaire consisting of questions interrogating these issues and asked them to answer the questions as accurately as possible.

## **Data and Commentary**

The following are responses to questions that students in the survey provided. The students' responses are presented below the relevant question.

## Language Use in Different Domains (home, school with friends, school with teachers)

### 1. Home: Which language(s) do you use at home?

Form two (Total: 33)	Form four (Total: 40)
Kiswahili: 14/33 (42.42%)	8/40 (20%)
Kiswahili & Tachoni: 1/33 (3.03%)	4/40 (10%)
Kiswahili & Bukusu: 4/33 (12.12%)	4/40 (10%)
Kiswahili & Sheng: 1/33 (3.03%)	3/40 (7.5%)
Bukusu: 6/33 (18.18%)	2/40 (5%)
Bukusu & Tachoni: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Malagori: 1/33 (3.03%)	0
English: 1/33 (3.03%)	1/40 (2.5%)
Tachoni: 2/33 (6.06%)	6/40 (15%)
Teso: 1/33 (3.03%)	0
Luo, Kabras & Kiswahili: 1/33 (3.03%)	0
Kabras & Luo: 1/33 (3.03%)	0
Kabras & Kiswahili: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Kiswahili, Isukha & Bukusu: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Kiswahili, English & Bukusu: 0	2/40 (5%)
Kiswahili, English & Tachoni: 0	2/40 (5%)
Kiswahili, Tachoni & Bukusu: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Tachoni & Sheng: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Tachoni, Sheng & Kiswahili: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Bukusu, Kiswahili, Sheng & English: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Tachoni, Kiswahili, Sheng & English: 0	1/40 (2.5%)

As shown in these data, the most commonly used languages at home by Form two students are Kiswahili and Bukusu (Kiswahili first, followed by Bukusu). Kiswahili is also the most commonly used language at home by Form four students, in addition to Tachoni (Kiswahili first and Tachoni second for Form four students). The general trend for both Form two and Form four students here is that at home most students speak Kiswahili alone, Bukusu alone and Tachoni alone or a combination of Kiswahili/Bukusu or Kiswahili/Tachoni.

### 2. Outside the classroom with friends: Which language(s) do you use at school to communicate with friends outside the classroom?

Form two (Total: 33)	Form four (Total: 40)
Kiswahili: 13/33 (39.39%)	8/40 (20%)
Kiswahili & English: 9/33 (27.27%)	15/40 (37.5%)
English: 3/33 (9.09%)	2/40 (5%)
English/Sheng: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Kiswahili & Sheng: 3/33 (9.09%)	6/40 (15%)
Sheng: 0	3/40 (7.5%)
Kiswahili/Luo/Kabras: 1/33 (3.03%)	0
Kiswahili, Tachoni, English: 1/33 (3.03%)	0
Kiswahili, English, Sheng, Bukusu: 1/33 (3.03%)	0
Kiswahili/Sheng/English: 1/33 (3.03%)	3/40 (7.5%)
Sheng/Kiswahili/Tachoni: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Sheng/Kiswahili/Bukusu: 0	1/40 (2.5%)
Tachoni: 0	0/40
Bukusu: 0	0/40
No answer: 1/33 (3.03%)	0

These data show that the most commonly used language for communication with friends is Kiswahili for Form two students (39.39%) followed by a combination of Kiswahili and English (27.27%). Use English alone is minimal (only 9.09%). Most Form four students use a combination of Kiswahili and English to communicate with friends outside the classroom (37%), but the number of those who use Kiswahili alone is greater than those who use English exclusively: 20% use Kiswahili exclusively, but only 5% use English exclusively.

3. Outside the classroom with teachers: Which language(s) do you use to communicate with teachers outside the classroom?

Form two (Total: 33)	Form four (Total: 40)
Kiswahili and English: 18/33 (54.55%)	28/40 (70%)
English: 13/33 (39.39%)	9/40 (22.5%)
Kiswahili: 1/33 (3.03%)	3/40 (7.5%)
Kiswahili/English/Bukusu: 1/33 (3.03%)	0

As shown in these data, the most commonly used languages for communication between Form two students and their teachers, and between Form four students and their teachers is Kiswahili and English. Notice that more students use English exclusively to communicate with teachers than those who use Kiswahili exclusively for the same purpose: 39.39% Form two students use English exclusively, but only 3.03%.

Form two students use Kiswahili exclusively; and 22.5 Form four students use English exclusively for this purpose compared to only 7.5% Form four students who use Kiswahili exclusively to communicate with their teachers. This is not surprising considering the fact that English is the language of instruction and that teachers do everything they can to encourage students to use English, including forcing them to use English.

### **Proficiency in English, Kiswahili and Mother Tongue**

#### 1. Can you express yourself well in English?

Form two (Total:33)

Yes: 28/33 (84%)

No: 4/33 (12.12%)

Partially: 1/33 (3.03%)

Form four (Total: 40)

36/40 (90%)

4/40 (10%)

0/40

Overwhelmingly, students say that they can express themselves well in English. Only 12% of Form two students and 10% of Form four students say they cannot express themselves well in English.

#### 2. Do you understand English well?

Form two (Total: 33)

Yes: 27/33 (81.81%)

No: 5/33 (15.15%)

Partially: 1/33 (3.03%)

Form four (Total: 40)

36/40 (90%)

4/40 (10%)

0/40

Students' response to this question also show their confidence in their proficiency in English. They overwhelmingly agreed that they understand English well. Only 15.15% of Form two students and only 10% of Form four students admitted to not understanding English well.

#### 3. Can you express yourself well in Kiswahili?

Form two (Total:33)

Yes: 33/33 (100%)

No: 0/33

Partially: 0/33

Form four (Total: 40)

40/40 (100%)

0/40

0/40

As these data show, students' proficiency in Kiswahili is slightly higher than their proficiency in English. All Form two students (100%) and all Form four students (100%) in the survey said they can express themselves well in Kiswahili.

4. Do you understand Kiswahili well?

Form two (Total: 33)

Yes: 30/33 (90.90%)

No: 3/33 (9.09%)

Partially: 0/33

Form four (Total: 40)

38/40 (95%)

1/40 (2.5%)

1/40 (2.5%)

In response to this question, most students said they understand Kiswahili well. Only 9.09% of Form two students and 2.5% of Form four students said they cannot understand Kiswahili well. It is surprising that these students can express themselves well in Kiswahili but they cannot understand it well. Perhaps when answering this question, they had in mind the difficult and less commonly used vocabulary that occasionally appear in lessons, novels and comprehension passages. Such words might make them think that they do not understand Kiswahili well.

5. Can you express yourself well in your mother tongue? (mother tongue as used here = parents' language)

Form two (Total:33)

Yes: 17/33 (51.52%)

No: 15/33 (45.46%)

Partially: 1/33 (3.03%)

Form four (Total: 40)

32/40 (80%)

8/40 (20%)

0/40

Students' response to this question indicates that Form four students have higher proficiency levels in mother tongue than Form two students. Of the 40 Form four students in the survey, 80% can express themselves well in mother tongue. Only 20% cannot. But of 33 Form two students in the survey, only 51.52% can express themselves well in mother tongue. The percentage of Form two students who cannot express themselves well in mother tongue is higher at 45.46%.

A similar proficiency pattern of lower mother tongue proficiency for Form two students compared to Form four students is illustrated in the students' response to the question about ability to understand mother tongue.



6. Do you understand your mother tongue well?

Form two (Total: 33)

Yes: 16/33 (48.49%)

No: 16/33 (48.49%)

Partially: 0/33

No answer: 1/33 (3.03%)

Form four (Total: 40)

30/40 (75%)

8/40 (20%)

2/40 (5%)

0/40

Thus, of the 40 Form four students, 75% can understand Mother Tongue, but 20% cannot. Form two students are not as good in their ability to understand mother tongue. Of the 33 students, 48.49% can understand Mother Tongue well. An equal percentage (48.49%) cannot.

### **Language of Instruction and Learning**

In view of the fact that English is not the first language of students in the survey, we thought it would be useful to find out whether the language of instruction (English) impedes learning in the opinion of students and whether replacing it with mother tongue or Kiswahili would be a better option for students. We asked the following three questions in this regard.

1. Is learning difficult because lessons are presented in English?

Form two (Total: 33)

Yes: 3/33 (9.09%)

No: 30/33 (90.91%)

Form four (Total: 40)

5/40 (12.5%)

35/40 (87.5%)

Overwhelmingly, Form two and Form four students do not think use of English for instruction is an impediment to learning. 90.91% of Form two students and 87.5% of Form four students felt use of English in teaching does not make learning difficult. Only 9.09% of Form two students and 12.5% of Form four students felt use of English makes learning difficult.

2. Would learning be easier if lessons were presented in your Mother Tongue?

Form two (Total: 33)

Yes: 0/33

No: 31/33 (93.94%)

No answer: 2/33 (6.06%)

Form four (Total: 40)

6/40 (15%)

34/40 (85%)

0/40

93.94% of Form two students and 85% of Form four students said use of Mother Tongue as language of instruction would not make learning easier. Only 6.06% of Form two students and 15% of Form four students felt use of Mother Tongue would help. The slightly higher percentage of Form four students (in comparison to Form two students) can be explained by the proficiency levels in mother tongue observed above: more Form four students than Form two students are proficient in mother tongue.

3. Would learning be easier if lessons were presented in Kiswahili?

Form two (Total: 33)	Form four (Total: 40)
Yes: 14/33 (42.42)	13/40 (32.5%)
No: 19/33 (57.58)	27/40 (67.5%)

Response to this question by students is quite interesting because the number of students who think that use of Kiswahili for instruction would make learning easier is higher even though it is not the majority who think so. Of the 33 Form two students in the survey, 42.42% felt use of Kiswahili would make learning easier while 57.58% thought it would not. And of the 40 Form four students, 32.5% felt use of Kiswahili as language of instruction would be positive, while 67.5% thought it would not make learning easier. Thus, more Form two students than Form four students are more positive about use of Kiswahili for instruction.

### General Language Preference

We felt it would be useful to find out students' attitudes to languages in their repertoire and languages that are spoken around them. We used the language preference question as proxy to their language attitudes. Our thinking is that one's attitude to a given language is reflected in their language preferences. When asked the question 'Which language do you prefer?', they responded as shown here below.

1. Which language do you prefer?

Form two (Total:33)	Form four (Total: 40)
Kiswahili: 18/33 (54.55%)	16/40 (40%)
English: 9/33 (27.27%)	18/40 (45%)
Sheng: 2/33 (6.06%)	2/40 (5%)
Kiswahili and English: 4/33 (12.12%)	3/40 (7.5%)
Tachoni: 0/33	1/40 (2.5%)

The most preferred language for Form two students is Kiswahili (54.55%). This percentage climbs higher if we include Sheng figures (given that Sheng a kind of variety of Kiswahili). Many Form four students tended to prefer English (45%). However, those preferring Kiswahili were not too far behind: 40% Form four students preferred Kiswahili. It becomes a statistical tie if we add the Sheng numbers to Kiswahili.

What is interesting (but disturbing) is that no Form two students and only one Form four student chose Mother Tongue as their preferred language. Why this is the case is open to discussion – and we will pick this up in the next section.

To help us understand students' preferred language choices, we asked them to give a reason or reasons for preference of the language they chose. The majority of students who chose Kiswahili gave the following reason for their choice:

- Kiswahili easy to understand
- It the national language
- It is spoken in East Africa.

For those who chose English, the following are the most commonly cited reasons:

- It is an international language
- It is easy to understand
- I feel good when I speak it
- It is used in teaching other subjects.
- “It usually sharpens me on answering questions in English and communicating to high class people.”

This final reason suggests that some students rightly associate English with prestige and class.

## **Discussion**

Students' responses in the survey indicate that the majority are proficient in English, which is the language of instruction in Kenyan secondary schools. This being the case, learning in English does not present any problems at all. They confirm this in their response to the question “Is learning difficult because lessons are presented in English?” 90.91% of Form two students and 87.5% of Form four students answered no to this question. These results are consistent with Wasike (2016) who found school dropouts did not name language of instruction as a factor in their dropping out of school.

The strong skills in English (understanding and expression) are a reasonable indicator of high proficiency in English. Students with such proficiency levels in English can be expected to perform well in the English language paper of final high school national examination, Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). But this is unlikely if performance in the English paper in previous years is any indication. For many years, performance in KCSE's English paper has not been consistently good. The following 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001 KCSE results show this inconsistent but mostly poor performance in English. The figures are mean grades. Kiswahili grades are provided to show that performance in Kiswahili is usually better.

Table 1: KCSE results, reproduced from Kembo (2006).

Subject	Maximum score	1998	1999	2000	2001
English	200	63.20	62.67	74.34	68.92
Kiswahili	200	94.27	81.19	96.52	85.42

Fifteen years later, performance in the KCSE English language examination had not improved by much. Thus in 2015, the mean score for English was 40.29% while that of Kiswahili was 47.88% (Kenya National Examinations Council 2016). These were not good results by any measure. But according to the Kenya National Examinations Council, these 2015 English results were an improvement over the 2014 results. The 2014 results must have been terrible.

Given the established trend of poor performance in the KCSE English paper by students, it is reasonable to extrapolate and conclude that the Mihuu students in our survey will most likely not perform well in the English paper. How then do we account for this mismatch – the mismatch between the students' reported superior skills in English and their likely poor performance in the KCSE English paper? Two reasons might explain this mismatch.

One, students' response to the questions in the survey about their knowledge and skills in English might not be accurate. It is possible that students are overrating their English skills and proficiency while downplaying their weaknesses in the language. Research has shown that people generally overrate their abilities and skills. For example, research has shown that people in North America have an exaggeratedly positive view of themselves, and overrate their skills and abilities (Heine 2004; Kruger and Dunning 1999). This is referred to as the Dunning-Kruger effect and has been linked to ignorance and inability to recognize one's incompetencies (Kruger J. and Dunning D. 1999). But in applying this to the Mihuu students' assessment of their own proficiency and skills in English, it necessary to be aware of cultural differences in the way people assesses them.

For example, Heine (2004) has shown that East Asians do not self-inflate their worth and abilities. The question that begs an answer, then, is whether Mihuu students in our survey are like East Asians or North Americans. My impression based on my experience living in Kenya is that they more like North Americans than East Asians. Esther Wanjiru Muchemi, a Kenyan entrepreneur agrees. She is quoted as saying: “We are living in an age where young people believe they should be rewarded just for being alive. A large percentage of them have a remarkably inflated perception of their abilities” (Waithaka and Majeni 2012).

The second possible reason is the mismatch between the skills in English that students have on the one hand and what is tested in the KCSE English paper on the other hand. Our questions in the survey asked students about their ability to understand English and their ability to express themselves in English. These questions pertain to listening comprehension and speaking, but the KCSE English paper does not test these skills. Usually it tests composition writing, reading comprehension, and grammar.

What makes matters even worse is the fact that the variety of English (and associated grammar rules) that students are taught and expected to use to answer grammar questions and to write their compositions is different from the variety they hear (used) more commonly in the country. Students are taught Standard British English, and they are tested on Standard British English. But the variety that they most familiar with – which the admired newscasters, celebrities and the Upper-class use, is what has been referred to Standard Kenya English. Scholars such as Kembo (2006), Mwangi (2003) among others have discussed features of Standard Kenyan English and have argued that it should be recognized as a legitimate variety of English – and be taught to Kenyan students instead of teaching them the unattainable Standard British English. Students and indeed all Kenyans who have attended school are aware of the existence of Standard Kenyan English, and tend to prefer it to either Standard British English on the one hand and local-language-influenced English on the other (Kioko and Muthwii 2004). It is therefore reasonable to expect students to perform poorly on the KCSE English paper if the English variety that they are taught and tested on is different from the variety that hear used around them and in the media.

Let us turn to other surprising and unexpected results from the survey, the first concerning the language that students use to communicate with their friends. Most students reported that they understand English well and that they can express themselves well in the language. However, it is surprising that English is not the language that they most commonly use to communicate with friends, and it is not chosen by an overwhelming majority as their preferred language - preferred language understood as the language they like and have a positive attitude towards. It is also surprising that a significant number of students agreed that learning would be easier if lessons were presented in Kiswahili.

As shown in the data presented in the previous sections, more students used Kiswahili exclusively to communicate with friends than those who used English exclusively. 39.39% Form two students and 20% Form four students said they used Kiswahili exclusively to communicate with friends. In contrast, only 9.09% Form two students and 5% Form four students used English exclusively to communicate with friends. It is interesting that a good number of students use a combination of Kiswahili and English: 27.27% Form two students and 37.5% Form four students. It is likely that Kiswahili dominates in the usages of those who said they used a combination of Kiswahili and English. This is the most likely scenario especially because the numbers of those who use Kiswahili exclusively are higher than those who use English exclusively.

English was also not chosen overwhelmingly as the students' preferred language. In response to the language preference question, 27.27% Form two students and 45% Form four students said they preferred English, and an almost equal number said they preferred Kiswahili: 54.55% Form two students and 40% Form four. The numbers for Kiswahili would be higher if those who chose Sheng as their preferred language (6.06% Form two and 5% Form four students) are included – considering the fact that Sheng is form of Kiswahili albeit considered 'corrupted' by some scholars and purist language users.

Given the students' reported proficiency in English, and given that they don't implicate English in learning difficulties, and given that English is favored by the current language policy, I expected that more students would use English exclusively to communicate with friends and that an overwhelming majority would chose it as their preferred language. But they didn't. I suspect that this has to do with their speaking capabilities: they are more confident speaking Kiswahili, but not as confident when it comes to speaking English. This is to be expected because when learning a foreign language, comprehension and reading skills and abilities are mastered before speaking skills.

But it could be that I am wrong in assuming that it is easier for students to understand English. This is because when asked if presenting lessons in Kiswahili would make learning easier, a significant number of students (though not the majority) answered in the affirmative. 42% of Form two students and 32.5% of Form four students agreed that presenting lessons in Kiswahili would make learning easier. The fact that there is a significant number of students who agree that learning would be easier if lessons are presented in Kiswahili (even though not in the majority), does indicate that some students are not as comfortable learning in English. It could be that both their comprehension, understanding and speaking skills in English are not good enough to facilitate learning.

Notice also that there are significant differences in how Form two and Form four students responded to some of the questions. An example is the response to the language preference question (which language do you prefer?). A higher percentage of Form four students than Form two students chose English: 45% of Form four students chose English, while only 27.27% of Form two students chose English. This may be due the realization by Form four students that English is favored by the government through its language policies, and more importantly the realization that English is a requirement for going to college and getting a good job. Their language preferences and attitudes, informed by the reality on the ground, are fully formed at this level. In contrast Form two students are still young in their education career, and they are not thinking about college and jobs yet. At their education level, their attitudes to languages in their repertoire are still evolving. But it could simply be a proficiency issue: it is possible that the English proficiency level of Form two students is lower than that of Form four students, hence the difference in the preference for English.

Perhaps the most interesting, and indeed disturbing trends that are evident in the data concern students' mother tongues. First off, very few students use mother tongue to communicate with their friends. This makes sense because students are not allowed to speak mother tongue at school, and more importantly, students at Mihuu speak different mother tongues. In other words, students don't always share one mother tongue. As shown earlier, 12.12% Form two and 47.5% Form four students have Tachoni as mother tongue; 39.39% Form two and 35% Form four students have Bukusu as their mother tongue; the remaining students have a variety of mother tongues for example Kiswahili, Lunyala, Dholuo, Ateso etc. It is therefore unlikely that mother tongue would be used to communicate with friends especially if the students speak different mother tongues.

But what is really disturbing is the high number of number of students who say they are not proficient in their mother tongue. 45.46% of Form two students and 20% of Form four students say they cannot express themselves well in their Mother Tongue. Poor proficiency in Mother Tongue is also reflected in how well students understand their mother tongue. 48.49% of Form two students and 20% of Form four students say they do not understand their mother tongue well. As these data show, Form two numbers are worse than the Form four numbers. This may suggest that language shift away from mother tongues or indigenous Kenyan languages is more advanced among younger students (Form two's) than among older students (Form four's). This trend, if it is a true reflection of what is happening everywhere in Kenya, should be a big concern for Kenyans and anyone who is interested in linguistic diversity. More research is needed to either confirm or disconfirm this linguistic trend. The results in our survey that indicate lower Mother Tongue proficiency levels for younger students might be a chance occurrence. It is possible that the Form two students at Mihuu who participated in our survey are children from inter-ethnic marriages, or that they live in towns where Kiswahili is the most commonly used language. If this is the case, these results might not be replicated in schools where most students are born to parents who speak the same indigenous Kenyan language (in homogenous families).

It is also disturbing that none to very few students said learning would be easier if lessons were presented in Mother Tongue. Similarly, too few students chose mother tongue as their preferred language. Zero Form two students and only one Form four student chose mother tongue as the language they preferred. We expected that mother tongue would be chosen (as preferred language) by slightly more students, especially those students who are proficient in their mother tongue. Two reasons might explain the choice of English and Kiswahili rather than mother tongue as the preferred language. First, it is likely that students have developed a negative attitude towards their own languages – because of the existing language policies and the negative direct and indirect messages conveyed to students about the low status and lack of appreciation for their mother tongues. In most cases, nothing positive is ever communicated and popularized about Kenyan indigenous languages with the exception of Kiswahili.

The second reason is students' competence and proficiency in mother tongue. As shown in the data presented above, many students – especially Form two students can neither understand their mother tongue (48.49%) nor express themselves well in mother tongue (45.48%). It is unlikely for such students to choose mother tongue as their preferred language.

## **Conclusion**

This paper presented and discussed the results of a survey that was conducted about language use, language proficiency, effect of language of instruction on learning, and language preferences of Form two and Form four students at Mihuu Secondary School. We found that most students use Kiswahili to communicate with each other and even in student-teacher communication, Kiswahili also featured prominently. In addition, proficiency in mother tongue seems to be reducing – so that more and more students are learning and using Kiswahili as their first language rather than their mother tongues. Another key finding of the survey is that students do not associate any learning difficulties with the use of English for instruction. Most of them reported that they understand English well, and that they can express themselves well in English. They therefore do not think that changing the language of instruction to Kiswahili or mother tongue would not make learning easier. English also featured prominently in the category of languages that students preferred. Surprisingly, mother tongue was not the preferred language by the majority. The message from this survey to linguists who would like to see mother tongue and Kiswahili replace English as the language of instruction is: approach the issue cautiously. English has clearly entrenched itself, and students do not see it as an impediment to learning. In order for students to buy into the change-language-of-instruction-project, they need to be helped to change their attitudes, and they need to be shown how and why their mother tongues are important languages. More importantly, a concerted effort must be made to create economic opportunities for Kenyan indigenous languages. Students are likely to change their perception of their languages and attitudes towards their own mother tongues if these languages can help them get jobs, or if these languages are a key ingredient to profitable ventures and businesses, community building and success.



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