

## Language Practices and Performance in English among High School Pupils of Kisii South Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

*The overriding purpose of this paper is to describe language practices and to determine whether the practices account for performance level in English language in Kisii South schools. The performance of English language in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education exam (henceforth KCSE) in Kisii South Sub County has been rated low. For instance, in the year 2012 and 2013, the sub-county registered low mean scores of 4.74 and 4.39 respectively out of a maximum score of 12. These results have caused concern because English is both medium of instruction and compulsory subject in all Kenyan public schools. The national syllabus emphasizes the core status of English but it appears schools implement this policy at different levels, possibly causing varying overall school performance and the performance in English language. Stratified random sampling was used to select 3 good performing schools, 3 average performing and 3 poor performing schools for the study based on their KCSE performance in English. A total of nine schools were selected for the study. An equal number of 60 pupils were selected randomly from each school to fill out questionnaires. Interview schedules with heads of department of languages and principals were also carried out. In addition, an observation schedule was applied after the questionnaires had been sent out for cross checking purposes. Data was analyzed within the framework of Language Management Theory. The results indicate that school language practices affect performance in English in the sampled schools; a situation that could go a long way in determining overall school performance in Kisii South Sub County.*

**Keywords:** Language policy. Language practices. Language management. English performance

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## INTRODUCTION

Corson (1999) defines school language policy as a document compiled by the staff of a school, often assisted by other members of the school community to which the staff members give their assent and commitment. Language policy identifies areas in the school's scope of operations and program where language problems exist that need a commonly agreed approach. In an ideal situation, a school language policy would be a policy document aimed at addressing particular language needs of a school. It is cross curricular in its concerns, breaking down traditional subject boundaries, and should normally involve not only staff, but also the whole school community, in its development and implementation.

This paper follows Spolsky's (2004) and Shohamy's (2006) characterization of language policy as comprising three components: practices, ideology, and planning. Shohamy understands language policy as entailing both overt and covert mechanisms which create and maintain both official (overt) policies and de facto ones (sometimes understood as practices). In this paper, language policy was understood as both overt and covert mechanisms that govern language practices in individual schools. The practices themselves were observable in language preferences, choices and management within the school. A number of studies have pointed out discrepancies existing between language policies and instructional practice in learning instructions, among them Menken and Garcia (2010), Muthwii (2002) and Tollefson and Tsui (2004).

The mismatch between policy and practice has been largely attributed to beliefs about language and attitudes of students and teachers. Some studies have pointed out that teachers play a crucial role in the ultimate choice of the language of instruction used. In most cases, however, the teacher's language preferences in the learning process appear to override language policy provisions. This is probably because the teachers' choices usually result from an inter play of factors like individual language preference and competence, attitude and values, learners' social and cultural environments, parents and the larger community (Muthwii, 2002).

Since Kisii South Sub County is largely rural, several in and out of school factors come into play with respect to language behaviour. At home, pupils are free to use the home language. However, the school management is assumed to take over control of language matters once pupils arrive in school. Language management in school is mainly enforced through school rules which prescribe languages to be used, how they are used and domains in which they are used in accordance with ideologies and preferences of the school.

Planned language use can boost or undermine language acquisition in the school context. This means performance of pupils in the target language is jolted if something goes wrong with planning and implementation of language policy in school. Like elsewhere, language policy in education is monitored closely in Kenya. Provisions about language use are made both in the constitution and in the language policy in education. However, implementation of this policy is usually left to management of individual schools. Whether the implementation is effective or not is therefore up to each school and its management to determine. In fact, individual school language management effort and style is what makes the difference in terms of language

acquisition and performance among schools.

Bamgbose (1991) has alluded to this implementation challenge in observing that Kenya's language policy makes sweeping statements about how language shall be used without specifying how the process will be carried out. Like Krashen (1981) rightly points out, the type of input a learner receives is important in the process of language acquisition. Implementation of language policy in school is undermined the moment use of other languages or their varieties with no role in the school system is allowed within school. In several schools in Kisii South for instance, English faces competition from Ekegusii (the area mother tongue), Kiswahili, Sheng (a social dialect popular among the youth) and a mix of both English and Kiswahili or Kiswahili and Mother tongue in varying proportions.

In Kenya, English Language plays a strategic role in the school system because all school subjects except Kiswahili are taught in it. However, performance in English as subject in national examination has been a matter of concern to parents, teachers, educators and researchers. For instance, KCSE overall performance in English between the year 2010 and 2013 was below average. In the year 2010, the mean score for English was 38.68%; in 2011, the score dropped to 36.42%; in 2012, it rose slightly to 37.88% before dropping further down to 27.47% in 2013 (KNEC, 2014).

Citing Ong'ondo and Barasa (2006), Nyambura (2007) affirms that performance of students in KCSE English has been disappointing over the years. Reports to that effect have been made as well by Kenya National Examination Council (see KNEC, 2012). The outcry about decline in performance of English in KCSE also grabbed the attention of Kenya's Education Cabinet Secretary who publicly announced that competition from Sheng was responsible for poor performance in English. The minister made this announcement while releasing KCSE results of 2013 (Daily Nation, March 3, 2014).

This study picked out Kisii South because it is one of the Sub counties of Kenya affected by dismal performance in English. In the 2012 KCSE results, for instance, the Sub County posted a measly mean of 4.74 in English. In 2013, the mean performance in English dropped even lower to 4.39. This is cause for worry because English is the sole language of instruction in Kenya's education system. Overall performance in school is therefore dependent on performance in English.

## **THEORY**

Language Management Theory (LMT) is used in this paper to account for language practices and management within the school. Three assumptions underlie LMT framework. First, that language policy is a social phenomenon involving consensual behaviors and beliefs of individual speakers or members of a speech community. In this study, the school context was understood as a social domain open to both external and internal influences. The school domain brings together participants with roles like teachers, pupils, prefects, head teachers and so on. The language practices these participants engage in go a long way in consolidating what is referred to in the theory as consensual behaviors.

The second assumption holds language policy as comprising three interrelated components namely, practices, beliefs and management. Language practices are the observable things that people do with language (the behaviours and choices - the linguistic features chosen and the variety used). By their nature, language practices are regular and predictable. Depending on consensual practices in each school, language choices and preferences fall within the overt-covert policy continuum regarding language use. It is these practices that provide the linguistic context for pupils learning language in school. In fact, actual language choices made within a given school get to define the language culture of that school.

Language management is the explicit effort by someone (teachers or prefects) with authority over participants in the school domain to modify their practices or beliefs about language. The LMT makes references to the internal and external influences on language policy in whatever domain but emphasizes the fact that there is usually a model of the language to learn from internal practices.

Finally, the LMT posits that proficiency in each language sets limits for language choice and implicit criteria for language management (languages outside our repertoire are also unavailable for us when we make language choices). Teachers therefore cannot force students to speak a language they have no knowledge of in the school context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The context of the research area called for careful procedures in sampling. There are 31 public secondary schools in Kisii South sub-county. Apart from a few of these schools located in urban neighbourhoods, most are day schools. Stratified random sampling was used to select schools for the study based on their KCSE performance in English. Nine schools out of 31 were purposively selected for the study based on their mean grade in English. Representative selection was made from among these schools according to level of their performance in English in the scale of good, average and poor. An equal number of 60 pupils were selected randomly from each school totalling 540 pupils to fill out questionnaires. Since respondents sometimes give subjective information when reporting about their own or other people's behaviour, an observation scheduled was developed and applied in the study in all the contexts of data collection for cross checking purposes. Data was analyzed within the framework of Language Management Theory (LMT) proposed in Spolsky (2007).

## **ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

In this study, language practices were used in reference to observable choices and preferences the subjects made of languages in their repertoire within school. The questionnaire used with pupils featured question items seeking to establish from them their language preferences and choices in a variety of domains within school. Some of the questions were however designed to report on the language behavior of other people as well. The variety of questions whose responses were analyzed sought the following kind of information:

- Language most used at school assembly.
- Language most often used by different groups of people in school.

- Language most often used among pupils during games time.
- Language most encouraged and most discouraged in school.
- Language most likely to be used in classroom.
- Language used in writing notes.
- Language spoken with friends
- Language spoken with teachers
- How well they spoke English.

Table 1 summarizes responses to the question “Which language is most used at your school assembly?” (Note: Codes A to I appearing on top of columns stand for school names that are withheld for ethical reasons).

Table 1  
Language MOST used at school assembly tabulated in percentages

<b>Language used</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>
English	25	4	20	9	11	10	27	32	10
Kiswahili	17	37	10	27	32	29	33	32	27
Both Kiswahili & English	50	47	60	55	42	48	33	34	54
Sheng	8	5	10	5	6	6	7	2	5
Mother tongue	0	6	0	0	9	7	0	0	4
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>KCSE mean average 2010-2014</b>	<b>6.12</b>	<b>3.40</b>	<b>6.46</b>	<b>4.72</b>	<b>3.38</b>	<b>4.71</b>	<b>5.58</b>	<b>6.32</b>	<b>5.12</b>

From the table, a mix of English and Kiswahili was the language most used at school assembly in the sampled schools. Considered separately, use of English at assembly across all schools was steadily lower (ranging only between 4% and 32%) compared to both English and Kiswahili (33% and 60%). In school B, English was scored at a low of 4%. This is although English, not Kiswahili and not a mix of both, is the language of instruction in school besides being a compulsory subject. It is therefore no surprise that school B had the low mean score in English of 3.4 (equivalent of D) between 2010 and 2014. According to LMT, the real policy is what provides the linguistic context for anyone learning a language. If the practice does not favour English as is so clear with schools B, E and I, performance can only be low.

A previous study conducted by Barasa (2005) blames poor performance in English on teachers of other subjects who believe it is somebody else’s responsibility to ensure use of English is encouraged. Because of this attitude, other subject teachers left pupils to their own designs about language choice. This study also sought to know from the pupils the language most often used by their teachers.

Table 2  
Language MOST OFTEN used by teachers in percentages

Language used	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
English	17	15	20	18	21	29	17	43	27
Kiswahili	25	21	20	18	33	19	25	21	37
Both Kiswahili & English	33	21	30	27	21	31	33	21	27
Sheng	8	0	10	0	2	2	2	0	0
Mother tongue	17	43	20	36	21	19	23	11	9
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	4	0

The results from Table 2 show that teachers across sampled schools most often used Kiswahili and a combination of English and Kiswahili. Notably, in schools where teachers were observed and reported to use English dismally like school B & E, their KCSE English average mean performance was equally found to be dismal (3.40 & 3.28 respectively). Krashen (1981) observes that the type of input a learner receives is important in the process of language acquisition. It can therefore be deduced from Table 2 that average performance is low due to insufficient exposure to English from teachers in these schools. Bwire (2008 cited in Groenewegen, 2008) reiterates the need to sensitize teachers to communicate in English in school to provide learners with an enabling environment for listening in the target language.

Like teachers, prefects play the role model in the face of fellow pupils. Prefects also help school administration implement management policies including policies governing language use. Respondents reported language most used by prefects as summarized below in Table 3.

Table 3: Language MOST OFTEN used by prefects in percentages

Language used	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
English	17	21	30	18	21	25	17	38	18
Kiswahili	25	32	16	33	38	35	41	21	32
Both Kiswahili & English	50	30	50	31	21	15	17	28	32
Sheng	8	13	4	9	11	19	25	11	9
Mother tongue	0	4	0	5	7	8	0	0	5
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	0	0	0	0	21	4	0	2	4

The study revealed that prefects mainly used Kiswahili and a mixture of English and Kiswahili in school across all sampled schools. Apart from school C and H where prefects reportedly use English alone at 30% and 38% respectively, and where mean performance in English is 6.46 and 6.32, use of English remained low in the rest of the schools. Given that prefects help with management of language policy in school, their preference for Kiswahili and a mixture of English and Kiswahili could undermine gains that can be made with learning English through their effort. This therefore is an instance where poor performance result from conflict

between covert practices and the overt policy.

Similarly, pupils appeared to cultivate the use of Kiswahili among themselves instead of English. We learn from the LMT theory that actual language choices made within a given school get to define the language culture of that school. As is clearly laid out in Table 4, use of English is ranked third in nearly all the schools sampled. Indeed, English is used almost at the same level as the more informal Sheng.

Table 4  
 Language MOST OFTEN used by pupils in percentages

<b>Language used</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>
English	13	11	20	9	11	19	8	32	10
Kiswahili	17	32	40	36	38	35	38	32	35
Both Kiswahili & English	41	32	20	28	17	15	25	23	29
Sheng	25	10	16	18	21	19	2	11	18
Mother tongue	2	11	2	7	8	8	2	2	6
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	2	4	2	2	8	4	2	0	2

From Table 4, the study found out that student most often preferred Kiswahili and a combination of English and Kiswahili in school across the sampled schools. This stands in clear contrast with the claim among Heads of Department (HODs) and head teachers that pupils regularly communicate in English within school.

Observations made in classroom revealed that majority of students were rarely active during the English lesson. Their level of participation was low and teachers seemed to deliberately engage them less. Some pupils occasionally murmured in Kiswahili. In school E for instance, many pupils appeared to doodle in class. In this school, Kiswahili use among pupils was rated at 38% followed by Sheng at 21%. The low mean score of 3.28 in English can then be explained in these terms. These findings corroborate those of Njeri (2010) that attributed low participation in class to low proficiency among pupils. Njeri (2010) observed that learners who can orally express themselves in English enjoy participation in classroom activities like storytelling and discussions while those who cannot remain quiet.

Barnes, Britton and Rosen (1969), Maryland (1977) and Maybin (1985) admit that school language policies, or Language Across the Curriculum as they are also known, are viewed by many educationists as a necessary and integral part of administration and curriculum practice. Overall responsibility for administration and curriculum practice in school rests with the head teacher. It was therefore necessary to ask pupils to share their perceptions about language most often used by the head teacher in school. Table 5 lays out what the respondents said.

Table 5  
Language MOST OFTEN used by head teacher in percentages

Language used	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
English	33	19	20	18	21	29	33	21	27
Kiswahili	17	21	20	18	21	19	17	21	18
Both Kiswahili & English	42	17	50	46	53	48	41	54	32
Sheng	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mother tongue	8	43	10	18	5	4	9	4	14
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5

The study found out that the head teacher most often used Kiswahili and a combination of English and Kiswahili in school. In school B, 43% of the respondents reported their head teacher used mother tongue most often. Since language management is the explicit effort by someone with authority over participants in the school domain to modify their practices or beliefs about language, we conclude contrary language preferences made by the head teacher serve to undermine performance in English. The LMT emphasizes the fact that there is usually a model of the language to learn from internal practices. If the model runs against the official policy that supports English, poor performance is the result as we can see from school B and E in Table 5.

Observations made at school assembly, during break time and when giving instructions confirm that head teachers of the sampled schools spoke Kiswahili or code mixed English and Kiswahili more often than English alone. This is unfortunate since Kenya's language policy in school gives special status to English, as subject and as medium of instruction.

Like other participants in the school social domain, non-teaching staff are in constant contact with pupils outside classroom. In rural schools, subordinate staff are usually people with little or no knowledge of English. But since they offer support services to pupils in school, it was important to find out their language practices with pupils in school. Table 6 below is a summary of the responses.

Table 6  
Language MOST OFTEN used with subordinate staff in percentages

Language used	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
English	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Kiswahili	27	9	10	9	11	10	17	11	11
Both Kiswahili & English	2	2	2	2	5	0	2	0	2
Sheng	7	4	8	0	0	0	2	0	0
Mother tongue	50	78	60	73	63	62	50	68	69
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	14	7	18	16	21	28	29	21	16

Subordinate staff most often used mother tongue with pupils in school. Their use of English is only reported at 2% in school C and in school I. Since subordinate staff are usually cooks, security guards, grounds men, messengers, cleaners and so on, it is expected that their interaction with pupils is regular. According to the LMT, Language practices participants engage in go a long way in consolidating consensual behaviors. This is another explanation for the low results in English in the sampled schools.

The most powerful influence on language behavior usually comes from among our peers. A question was designed in this study to prod pupils about the language they were most likely to use during games time, when they are relaxed and their speech is spontaneous.

Table 7  
 Language MOST USED by pupils during games in percentages

<b>Language used</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>
English	17	2	20	5	6	10	5	17	18
Kiswahili	33	35	40	55	47	48	46	47	39
Both Kiswahili & English	13	2	14	4	10	2	10	13	21
Sheng	33	18	20	18	21	19	33	21	18
Mother tongue	3	43	4	11	13	6	10	2	4
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	0	0	2	7	3	15	3	0	0

It emerged that students mainly used Kiswahili and Sheng during games time. From school C however, 20% of the pupils reported use of English, which partly explains why their mean score in English stands relatively higher than the rest. Preference for Kiswahili and Sheng is not without an explanation. According to LMT, proficiency in a given language sets limits for language choice and sets implicit criteria for language management (languages outside our repertoire are also unavailable for us when we make language choices). So the pupils use Kiswahili and Sheng because they are constrained by repertoire, so to speak. As we have seen from previous evidence, what are the odds that these pupils would speak English well?

Observations made in each of the schools confirm many pupils only have smattering knowledge of English, but not enough to carry on a conversation. Limitations in their exposure and in context encourage the use of languages other than English, which is why their performance in it remains generally low.

Spolsky (2009) asserts that practices are the real language policy although participants may be reluctant to admit it. Language policy is not only the explicit written, overt de jure, official and top down decision making about language, but also the implicit unwritten, covert, de facto, and unofficial ideas and assumptions which can influence the outcomes of policy making as emphatically and definitively as the more explicit decisions (Schiffman, 2006). Scholars have argued that even when there is no official language policy, the linguistic status quo becomes the implicit policy (Schiffman, 1996). This study followed up on the use of English as medium of

instruction in classroom.

Table 8  
Language MOST used in class in percentages

<b>Language used</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>
English	17	11	20	18	21	19	25	43	18
Kiswahili	50	43	40	36	43	48	36	26	44
Both Kiswahili & English	17	23	20	23	11	10	22	14	28
Sheng	13	10	16	15	17	15	8	17	4
Mother tongue	3	21	2	4	4	4	5	0	4
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	1	2	2	4	4	4	3	0	2

Even when the language of instruction in Kenyan schools remains English, Kiswahili was reported by the respondents as the most likely language to be used in classroom (ranging between 26 and 50%). It is also unusual that Sheng and a mix of English and Kiswahili would be used side by side with English in the classroom domain in all the sampled schools. In schools A, B, D, F and I, English is actually used below 20%! This is irrespective of the fact that English is the official language and medium of instruction of formal learning throughout the education system in Kenya. As is clear from Table 8, poor level of achievement in other subject areas may be due to poor cultivation of English language in classroom. Rather than be the only medium of instruction in classroom as the syllabus prescribes, English has to compete with Kiswahili, Sheng and mother tongue in this domain.

Observations made in school I paint an even grimmer picture; English and Kiswahili are allocated days in school during which they alone are spoken. During Kiswahili days, use of English is prohibited out of and in class. This confirms observations made by Muthwii (2001) cited in Chomba (2008) that teachers sometimes develop and implement school language policies without any reference to the official language policy in education. Asked what language they used in writing notes, respondents reported as outlined in Table 9.

Table 9  
Language used in writing notes in percentages

<b>Language used</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>
English	58	43	70	46	43	48	66	53	64
Kiswahili	17	4	20	18	21	33	17	36	18
Both Kiswahili & English	25	53	10	36	36	19	17	11	18
Sheng	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mother tongue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

The study found out that English is the language most often used in writing notes. Surprisingly, use of a combination of English and Kiswahili was also reported as language for writing notes. School B reports use of this combination rather rampantly at 53%. Could this explain why average mean in English at this school is 3.40? There is therefore cause to reason that use of a combination of English and Kiswahili undermines performance of English in school.

Pupils belong to social networks at varying degrees. However, their language habits are better revealed in close networks involving friends. This study considered language choices the respondents made with their friends.

Table 10  
Language spoken with friends in percentages

Language used	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
English	8	4	20	6	6	6	8	6	2
Kiswahili	33	42	40	36	26	33	33	32	39
Both Kiswahili & English	15	11	16	4	15	13	8	15	5
Sheng	42	28	20	16	21	19	43	39	18
Mother tongue	2	11	4	36	11	10	8	4	36
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	0	4	0	0	21	19	0	4	0

The study found out that student most often used Kiswahili and Sheng to speak to their friends. Notably, English was dismally used when speaking with friends. During the release of 2013 KCSE results, Kenya's Education Cabinet Secretary observed that the performance of English had declined sharply, attributing the trend to increased use of Sheng in schools (Daily Nation, March 3, 2014). As to the language they spoke with teachers, pupils had the following to say.

Table 11  
Language spoken with teachers in percentages

Language used	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
English	17	11	20	9	11	10	17	11	11
Kiswahili	50	21	60	55	64	58	50	64	55
Both Kiswahili & English	30	49	20	4	14	22	30	21	27
Sheng	3	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Mother tongue	0	16	0	9	11	10	0	4	0
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Results show that students most often used Kiswahili to speak with teachers across all sampled schools. Ellis (2005) asserts that the more target language exposure students receive, the

faster the students learn. This study observed that students in most schools in the sub-county do not get sufficient exposure to English. Proof exists in School C whose consistent exposure to English leads to better performance. Like Krashen (1981) reiterates, the type of input a learner receives is important in the process of language acquisition.

Since language management is the explicit effort by someone with authority over participants in the school domain to modify their practices or beliefs about language, it was necessary to find out from the respondents which language was most encouraged and which was most discouraged in school.

Table 12  
 Language MOST encouraged in school in percentages

<b>Language used</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>
English	47	53	50	63	53	58	50	53	62
Kiswahili	42	21	40	35	43	38	33	43	36
Both Kiswahili & English	10	26	10	2	4	4	15	4	2
Sheng	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mother tongue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0

Table 13  
 Language MOST discouraged in school in percentages

<b>Language used</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>
English	0	4	4	4	0	4	5	4	4
Kiswahili	0	2	6	5	0	5	3	6	5
Both Kiswahili & English	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sheng	25	43	20	27	36	33	25	37	27
Mother tongue	67	50	70	64	63	58	64	53	64
Mother tongue & Kiswahili	67	50	70	64	63	58	64	53	64

English was reported as the most encouraged language while Mother Tongue and Sheng turned out to be the most discouraged. Interestingly, while a mix of Kiswahili and English is reportedly not discouraged (Table 13), most respondents were hesitant to say this mix was encouraged in school (Table 12). The ambivalence in these responses indicates that language managers in school are yet to effectively modify practices and beliefs about English language. Language practices in the sampled schools are inconsistent with the official policy defining status of English in school.

Finally, the study asked the respondents to rate their own ability to speak English in a

calibrated scale of Very Poor to Very Well. As can be seen from Table 14, none confessed poor or very poor ability to speak English, which begs the question why is it that they spoke Kiswahili, a mix of English and Kiswahili or any other language, in more domains and with more people in school than English? The answer probably lies in the mismatch between language policy provisions and actual language practices within individual schools.

Table 14  
 Learners' ability to speak English in percentages

<b>Language used</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>I</b>
Very well	33	11	50	9	11	20	8	21	13
Well	59	53	40	36	36	32	37	74	45
Moderately	8	36	10	46	54	48	55	4	43
Poor	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	0	0
Very poor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Class observation and conversations that the researcher had with some students indicated and confirmed that many learners had grammar and pronunciation problems that could contribute to their poor performance in KCSE exams.

## CONCLUSION

This paper utilized observations of pupils in demonstrating the mismatch between official language policy in education on one hand and regular language practices in school on another. Following careful examination of responses to each question item from the nine schools, and considering mean grade performance in English for each school between 2010 and 2014, the paper concludes that poor performance in English results from haphazard implementation of the official language policy in school among other factors.

There is sufficient evidence that English faces strong competition from languages like Kiswahili, Sheng and Mother Tongue in the school context. So much is the competition that in most schools, code switching between English and Kiswahili is normal in and out of class.

The study also found that pupils are more at ease with Kiswahili than English. This explains why their participation in class where English should be the medium of instruction is low. Out of class, pupils habitually use Kiswahili, Sheng or even Mother Tongue depending on who they are talking to. Such tendencies spill over to more formal contexts where English is expected to dominate thereby eating up time meant for its mastery. These practices are so entrenched in the day to day affairs of sampled schools that one would be justified to claim they each operate a school language policy that runs parallel to the official language policy in education. At least for the sampled schools, this explains why performance in English is low in Kisii South Sub- County.

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