



# Implication of Language Use in Higher Education Curricula Development and Implementation: A Case of Moi University, Kenya

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## Abstract

Knowledge creation, dissemination, and consumption require the use of an appropriate language. Kenyan Higher education relies more on non-native languages, which brings about communication disconnect at all levels, including, the utilisation stage/ in practice, a stage that determines how much of the acquired knowledge is consumed for societal development. The study investigates communication challenges that professionals in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (henceforth, STEM) and Law encounter in their careers, and argues for the inclusion of the Kiswahili component in the Kenyan Higher education curricula, for effective knowledge and skills application. Consequently, we identify and critically discuss the place of language in the development and implementation of curricula in Moi University (henceforth, MU); examine the dis/harmony in knowledge and skills application and utilisation, and finally, conceptualise a holistic Higher education future that embraces the peoples' shared linguistic code- for productivity. Using the Communication Accommodation Theory, data from 15 university students, 10 lecturers and 15 practitioners in the above fields, 6 Kiswahili, French, and German (2 for each) lecturers, and 20 consumers of related knowledge and skills are analysed. Findings inform the Kenyan education policy-makers and implementers on the need to re-evaluate the place of language in Higher education curricula for STEM (and by extension, the Arts, Social sciences, and Humanities, (henceforth, AHSS)) for effective knowledge and skills utilisation and eventual societal well-being.

## Introduction

Language is important in Knowledge creation, dissemination and consumption (Buckley et al., 2005). The effectiveness of knowledge and skills utilisation by the target groups depends on the efficiency of the transfer of knowledge by the graduates. As observed in the 2015 Global Monitoring Report on Education, multilingualism and linguistic policies in education are key factors in achieving effective learning outcomes. One of the most important learning outcomes of any curriculum is for the graduate of any academic Discipline to effectively function in their areas of specialisation; that is, effectively



transmit the acquired knowledge and skills for societal well-being. Thus, education triggers positive change through social action (Ozmon & Carver, 1986).

The African Higher education system is a colonial offshoot. Most structures were inherited in totality. Despite the social, cultural, economic and political differences, efforts to have an 'African' education have been unsuccessful. Given that University education is the bedrock of a nation's entire education system, decisions concerning curricula impact all other levels of education. Currently, most of the curricula in Kenyan Higher education, specifically in MU, focus on Discipline-specific content, with little regard to the linguistic aspect, which plays an important role in one's career (Muukari, 2008). Mazrui (2003) observed that most African intellectuals or researchers cannot advance a scientific or academic discussion in an African language. Unfortunately, this is the norm because professionals use English (the instructional language) with their target groups in their operation spaces, ignoring the recipients' linguistic and cultural context. This arises from the inability to translate acquired knowledge into their beneficiaries' understood language, which results in a communication barrier that negatively impacts the recipients' societal involvement.

In this study, we focus on the place of language in Kenyan higher education curricula and argue for revising them for professionals' optimal service delivery. We argue for the inclusion of the Kiswahili component in all higher education curricula in MU (and, by extension, other Kenyan universities) since a majority (27% of the population) of Kenyans understand Kiswahili, whether literate or illiterate (Cowling, 2024). We argue that communicating discipline-specific registers in the recipients' understood language achieves the communication objective.

Implementing the study findings contributes to having products of Kenyan higher education efficiently function in their areas of expertise. Likewise, the clientèle, who are the recipients of such knowledge and skills, will effectively consume and propagate the same for societal well-being. From a point of understanding, involvement in national development is more productive.

### **Literature Review**

The language of higher education curricula in Africa is largely foreign, with African languages being relegated (Plonski et al., 2013). Despite their unifying function in multilingual settings, foreign languages exclude and marginalise most African populations (Alexander, 2002). This relegation has negatively impacted their attitude towards their African languages (De Klerk, 2002).

Research on language and Higher education in Africa has focused on language as a medium of instruction (Brock-Utne, 2010), English language policies in Africa and language identity (Parmegiani 2014). Concerning Kenyan Higher education, research on the use of English in education has shown that the product of this education does not meet the expectations (KICD, 2016). The current study focuses on Kenyan Higher education curricula and the end product in practice. We argue that the language of instruction is central; it either facilitates or hinders curricula delivery, thereby determining the nature of the end product and its effectiveness in practice.

Higher education is meant to equip intellectuals to creatively harness the available resources (capital and human) for societal well-being. Consequently, communication is key at the creation, dissemination, and utilisation stages, and this is where the disconnect is. We, therefore, explore the decoupling of the MU curricula and the lived realities as far as language and knowledge transfer and consumption are concerned. We argue that sustainable development has eluded Kenya (and Africa in general) because modern development thinking that comes through Western education and



language is not in tandem with the peoples' lived realities. The study re-imagines an education derived from curricula that align with the linguistic needs of the recipients for sustainable development.

### **Theoretical framework**

Gile's (1980) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is applied. The theory suggests that individuals make communication adjustments to create, maintain, or decrease social distance in interaction. It explains why and the implications of such adjustments. According to CAT- whose focus is on language-, communication becomes effective when the socio-historical context of interaction is considered; negotiation is done depending on the prevailing social and situational factors, and individuals/ groups adapt communication strategies such as convergence and divergence depending on the relationship that holds between them and their interactants.

In the current study, CAT is used to explain the need for professionals to adjust in their linguistic behaviour to their interactants' level while on duty; the need to adapt the convergence strategy, where a common linguistic code or style is used, which, although it may cost personal and social identity, it results into effective communication (Gudykunst, 1995). In this regard, we suggest that this be done upfront by taking due consideration of the language component in the curricula development process. We suggest that Kiswahili, the language of wider coverage in Kenya, be included as a subject to be learned and as an instructional language for teaching discipline-specific registers. This will enhance effectiveness in delivery (by professionals) and the wider society's utilisation of knowledge and skills. Although CAT was developed for communication in Organizational contexts (Baker, 1991), Mediated contexts (Bell, 1984), intercultural contexts (Bourhis, 1984), Intergender contexts (Fitzpatrick et al. 1995) and Intergenerational contexts (Giles & Coupland, 1991), it is suitable for the current study because of the macro contextual nature that makes it possible to handle any communicative intricacies arising in either interpersonal or intergroup contexts, regardless of the social and contextual dynamics.

### **Methods**

This is a descriptive study that takes a multidisciplinary approach. It uses primary data from four sample groups: students, lecturers, practising professionals, and the target consumers. The study is confined to MU and its environment within Uasin Gishu County, Kenya.

From the fields of Medicine, ICT, Engineering, Agriculture, and Law, ten lecturers (2 from each) and fifteen practitioners (3 from each) were purposively sampled; fifteen students (3 from each field) were randomly selected; twenty consumers (4 from each field) were sampled using snowballing, and six lecturers teaching German, Kiswahili and French (2 for each) were purposively sampled to participate in the study; both genders were involved. For the consumers, both the literate and the illiterate participated in the study. The units of analysis were the curriculum content and the language component at conceptual and practical levels. Data were analysed using the CAT to establish to what extent the 'owners' of knowledge and skills adjusted to accommodate their interactants and the implication of the same on the recipients at all stages of knowledge dissemination and consumption.

### **Results and Discussion**

In this section, we present the results and discuss language and curricula in MU, dis/harmony in knowledge and skills application and utilisation, and a conceptualised Kenyan holistic higher education in the future, where the Kiswahili language is embraced in the curricula.



### **Language and STEM Curricula in Moi University**

The relevance of language in higher education curricula cannot be overemphasised (Cummins, 2000). The language of the curriculum determines the effectiveness of the lecturer's content delivery, the learners' consumption, and the dissemination of acquired knowledge and skills in practice. Consequently, the choice of language is important.

The MU STEM curricula (and, by extension, the AHSS) use English in design and implementation. This is observed in the following analyses:

#### ***Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery***

The Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery curriculum at MU is designed and implemented fully in English. Besides the core Discipline outcomes, the programme trains graduates to be able to communicate effectively with patients, families and stakeholders in a culturally responsive manner; understand and sensitivity to diversity; practice medicine in a community/population context; and contribute to the prevention of ill health, among others (MU Curriculum, BSc Medicine and Surgery, 2019). We argue that language (and, by extension, courses in AHSS) must be embraced for these specific outcomes to be effectively realised.

Analysing the curriculum's Discipline core content reveals unequivocal attention to achieving the programme's objectives. Furthermore, the curriculum has supportive, relevant courses that include *communication skills*, which prepares medical graduates to communicate competently with their patients in history taking, diagnosis, and treatment and establish good interpersonal relationships that engender better health care services. Other relevant supportive courses are *ICT in Learning, Introduction to Entrepreneurship, Behavioural Sciences and Ethics*.

That notwithstanding, there exists a gap in knowledge and skills dissemination and consumption at the conceptual level, which derives from the language paradox. Data from lecturers and learners in the discipline reveal the communication buffer that arises from the language of instruction, which is far removed from the linguistic realities in the classroom and the wider community where graduates are expected to function. Courses in medicine involve problem-solving, critical thinking and knowledge of natural, behavioural, and social science concepts and principles. For this to be effectively attained, the language of instruction plays a key role. Learners interviewed admitted having challenges conceptualising medical jargon, contributing to high student dropout rates.

#### ***Bachelor of Engineering in Chemical and Process Engineering***

The chemical and Process Engineering curriculum at MU focuses on developing and applying manufacturing processes involving chemical or physical changes. The chemical engineer primarily designs, constructs, and operates equipment and plants. Subjects such as applied Chemistry, Physics, and Mathematics are core to the Discipline.

MU's Chemical and Process Engineering curriculum is designed and implemented in English. However, French and German are taught for specific purposes, such as engineering. Besides the Discipline core courses, relevant required courses such as *Communication Skills for Engineers, HIV& AIDS Awareness, Computer Programming, foreign languages (French and German), and Entrepreneurship for Small Businesses* are taught (MU Curriculum, B.Eng. Chemical and Process Engineering, 2018).

That notwithstanding, the glaring absence of a language of wider communication in the curriculum cannot be ignored. Teaching basic French and German to Engineers prepares graduates to



communicate with a clientèle who speaks either of the two languages. However, one wonders, why not begin by empowering the engineering graduate to effectively communicate with the local clientèle, who are a majority and easily accessible, whose action/ inaction directly impacts societal well-being? Having courses in *Kiswahili for Engineers*, where specific engineering registers are taught in Kiswahili, is bound to prepare the graduate better at all levels. It is paramount to start from within, rather than without, by tapping into the readily available local resources for national development.

Data from engineering lecturers revealed the inability of most Engineering students to appropriately comprehend or articulate certain Engineering concepts in English. According to the tracer study conducted by the Ministry of Education, graduate engineers had adequate theoretical knowledge but inadequate problem-solving skills, soft skills, communication and presentation skills, and self-confidence. In performance, they rated at 5.7 on a scale of 10 (MOE, 2023). We argue that the issues raised in the report call for including courses from the AHSS, e.g. psychology, Sociology, communication and linguistics, and specific to this study, Kiswahili for Engineering, focusing on engineering-specific jargon. This calls for lecturers to adjust content delivery to accommodate their learners, who appropriately accommodate their clients.

#### ***Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Extension and Education***

MU's Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Extension and Education curriculum is designed and implemented in English. The programme aims to produce graduates who have undergone technical agriculture, extension, and agricultural education training and can assume responsibilities in teaching, research, extension, rural development, and private and entrepreneurial sectors. The programme emphasises skills of acquisition and application of theoretical knowledge (MU Curriculum, BSc Agricultural Extension and Education, 2017). Acknowledging the context in which the graduate is expected to operate, and based on the programme's expected outcomes, the curriculum has incorporated complementary courses that equip graduates to appropriately function in their areas of expertise; these include *Communication Skills*, *HIV & AIDS Management* and *Computer Applications*.

The agricultural sector is the backbone of Kenya's economy, contributing approximately 33% of her (GDP) and another 27% indirectly through linkages with other sectors. The sector employs more than 40% of the total population and 70% of the rural population (FAO, n.d; USAID, 2023). The sector also accounts for 65% of the export earnings and provides a livelihood for more than 80% of the Kenyan population (FAO, n.d). Given its place in Kenya's economy, having a curriculum that speaks to prevailing societal needs is very important.

Evidence from lecturers, students, and practitioners in agriculture shows that most students had communication challenges, both at the conceptual and practical level, resulting from the disconnect between the instructional and the recipients' language. Specifically, students admitted having comprehension challenges of Discipline-specific concepts. Practitioners admitted to having challenges in knowledge sharing with their target groups, which agrees with Lonyangapuo's (2015) research in which practitioners acknowledged having competence and skills in their specialisation but could not disseminate the same in a language other than English, the instructional language.

#### ***Bachelor of Science in Journalism and Media Studies***

MU's Bachelor of Science in Journalism and Media Studies curriculum is developed and implemented in English. The programme aims to produce competent media professionals for the print, electronic, and digital media industries. Likewise, the graduate is expected to think critically about media content, history, and effects (MU Curriculum, BSc Journalism and Media Studies, 2021).



To achieve the programme's goal, relevant corroborative courses, such as *Themes in East African Literature, International Relations, Government and Politics in East Africa, Kenya in World History, and Creative Writing*, which are central to realising the programme's objectives, are offered alongside discipline-specific courses. This notwithstanding, Kiswahili for specific purposes; thus, *Kiswahili for Media* is notably absent in the curriculum.

As a regional language in the diverse linguistic landscape, a symbol of identity and unity, and a part of Kenya's heritage, it is important that Kiswahili is given space in the curriculum to equip graduates to better function in Kenya's complex linguistic situation.

Data gathered from Kiswahili lecturers point to the need for including the Kiswahili component in the curriculum. This will enhance the quality of media professionals, enable them to articulate information in both English and Kiswahili, ensure accurate translation from either language, allow them to adjust and operate in changing linguistic environments, and give them an advantage in the job market.

#### ***Bachelor of Laws (LL. B)***

MU's Bachelor of Laws (LL. B) curriculum is designed and implemented in English. The programme aims to infuse ethical values and practical skills in legal training to nurture dynamic lawyers who can adapt and fit in the competitive world. The programme's graduate should proficiently communicate solutions to legal problems both orally and in writing; effectively discharge their role in a diverse, multicultural, globalised market and environment; evaluate the historical, socio-economic and cultural context in which the law, policies and practices are developed and implemented, and critique the role of the law in different contexts. The Discipline-specific content is tailored to provide learners with knowledge, skills and attitudes to meet the ever-evolving career requirements in the legal profession (MU Curriculum, Bachelor of Laws (LL. B), 2019).

That notwithstanding, evaluating the expected outcomes points to an existing gap that requires attention for the graduate's optimum performance. Given the cultural and linguistic context in which lawyers operate, we argue for including a course on *Kiswahili for Lawyers* (besides other relevant AHSS courses) for fully-fledged law products.

Evidence from lecturers and learners shows that extreme documentation, specialised texts/genres, and complex legal discourses in the Discipline are the genesis of incomprehensibility. In reading theory, Wallace (2023) argues that knowledge of the genre one reads or listens to facilitates comprehension. Incorporating a Kiswahili component that is attentive to specific legal jargon can reduce incomprehensibility at the conceptual and practical levels.

The preceding analyses and discussion on the five programmes 'justify' the long-standing misconception about the 'inability of African languages in education' and the negative attitude towards their use (Ouane & Glanz, 2010); this has had negative implications. We argue against the incessant use of English only as the media of instruction in Kenyan Higher education STEM (by extension, the AHSS) curricula, as it interferes with optimal dissemination and consumption of knowledge and skills at the conceptual and practical levels. Including Kiswahili is important since language, thought patterns and responses are interwoven (Vygotsky, 1962).

#### **Dis/harmony in Knowledge and Skills Application and Utilisation**

In this section, we discuss some communication challenges that practising professionals in Medicine, Engineering, ICT, Agriculture and Law experience. Harmony in knowledge and skills application and



utilisation is an assurance for sustainable development. This follows from an education system that mirrors and speaks to a nation's social, economic and political reality. Considering the consumer of the product of an education ensures ownership and involvement in national growth. As observed, the gap in MU curricula calls for attention that can, in turn, trigger the desired outcome.

### **The Medical Field**

Medical experts are regarded by their patients as having answers to all health issues; patients believe that medics are equipped with knowledge and skills for health intervention (Brown, 2013), which is true. However, despite their expertise, the language of instruction often acts as a buffer in one's practice.

Evidence from medical practitioners and their patients shows that despite their proficiency, their recipients' cultural and linguistic situations preclude optimum service delivery. Linguistic adjustment and patient accommodation are important for effective healthcare service delivery. Kenya has missed out on sustainable health care because the knowledge, skills, and accompanying thinking from Western education and language are not in tandem with the peoples' lived realities. This disconnect has worked against the nation's well-being.

Furthermore, Kenya's universal health coverage (UHC) policy is attentive to transforming the country's health sector for enhanced service delivery through the principles of equity, people-centredness, efficiency, social solidarity, and a multi-sectoral approach (MOH, 2020). To realise the UHC policy, Kiswahili, the language of the majority, needs to be embraced in all Kenyan higher education medical curricula.

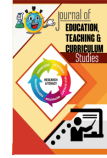
### **The Field of Engineering**

According to the Institution of Engineers of Kenya (IEK, 2021: 3), "*The modern world has been largely an engineering project. The structures, machines, processes and organisation ... are all largely due to the engineering profession*". This notwithstanding, IEK (2021) further acknowledges the AHSS's role in effective engineering practice and sustainable development.

Nonetheless, tracer studies conducted showed that "...75.5% of the engineering graduates get employed in engineering related fields, ... 24.5% were employed in non-engineering fields like auditing, accounting, banking, insurance, sales, and marketing/customer service/shopkeeping, farming..." (MOE, 2023:31). Given the diverse environment in which engineering graduates operate that transcends the engineering field, equipping them with complementary knowledge and skills beyond the specifics of the discipline is vital. Such includes knowledge and skills in communicating and operating in a language that aligns with the Kenyan cultural and linguistic environment- Kiswahili.

Evidence from practising engineers and their clients reveals their inadequacy in soft skills. Specifically, the majority are unable to linguistically adjust to accommodate their interlocutors and establish interpersonal relationships through effective communication. Such incapacity hinders a majority from participating in national development, as knowledge 'owners' are unable to transmit the same to members of the wider society.

Engineers are better placed to spur national development in the current technological age through innovation. This notwithstanding, sustainable development must be built and nurtured from within and not from without. Such is achieved when all are involved from the point of understanding, hence the need to include *Kiswahili for Engineers* in the MU Engineering curriculum.



### ***The Field of Agriculture***

Agriculture is Kenya's economic pillar, and its sustainability is crucial to national growth. Kenya's agricultural policy (2021) provides a strategy for realising the agricultural goals and targets as articulated in Vision 2030; it identifies the challenges facing the Agricultural sector and provides guidelines on mitigation; the policy guiding principles include: "...provide for economically viable, socially equitable and environmentally sustainable use of land for crops, livestock and fisheries... and utilisation of science and indigenous knowledge and resources" (pp 11- 12). For these principles to work, we argue for a multi-disciplinary approach, where the AHSS, specifically Kenya's language of broader coverage, is considered at the policy and implementation stage.

Data from practising extensional agricultural professionals reveal the communication challenges encountered. The multilingual situation demands using a shared linguistic code like Kiswahili, which experts fall short of- concerning agricultural jargon. The inability to linguistically accommodate their interlocutors means that a majority miss out on relevant information required for optimal participation. We argue for the inclusion of *Kiswahili for Agriculture*, which is required for a fully-fledged graduate ready to productively engage with the wider community.

### ***The Field of Information Science***

Media as an important vehicle for information sharing cannot be overemphasised. Consequently, having well-equipped professionals to function in this space is important. In response to this demand, the MU, BSc Journalism and Media Studies curriculum (2021) aspires to produce graduates who are critical and analytical, capable of handling both complex and abstract issues in the industry. To this end, the curriculum is adequate. However, we propose including the Kiswahili component as a required course that supports the discipline.

Data on functional language use by the discipline graduates show a preference for English—the instructional language—over Kiswahili. Nevertheless, they admit that their incompetence in Kiswahili works against them. This agrees with feedback received from the Media Industry on learners specialising in Media from the School of Arts and Social Sciences, MU. While on industrial attachment, employers constantly advise that media students be taught Kiswahili courses to improve their functioning, given the Kenyan linguistic landscape.

### ***The Legal Field***

The legal profession requires that the graduate of Law has analytical and problem-solving skills, critical reading abilities, general research skills, oral communication and listening abilities, task organisation and management skills, and writing skills (Greenberg, 2002). This being the case, and based on the programme's expected outcomes, it takes more than being well-grounded with Discipline-specific knowledge and skills.

Data elicited from legal practitioners show that they are competent in discharging their mandate but fall short of communicating in a language other than English. This is occasioned by the normative long structures that communicate key concepts, complex narratives and phrases, legal jargon lacking equivalents in other languages, familiar words and phrases bearing different semantics in legal contexts and the hegemonic legal contexts. Lay clients also acknowledge having comprehension challenges caused by language and style, even those competent in English. This agrees with Olson (2014), who argues that legal language use makes comprehension difficult, rendering non-participation by lay persons in legal proceedings, which interferes with justice.





The challenges in legal discourses call for the inclusion of courses on Language and Law/ Forensic Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, and, specifically, Kiswahili for lawyers in the curriculum; this will equip graduates to uphold justice by effectively engaging in legal discourses- in practice.

### **Mediation and Implication**

English is at the core of MU curricula. Consequently, communication breakdown demands that professionals translate the information into the language of wider communication, i.e. Kiswahili. This, however, poses a challenge as a majority lack the linguistic capacity required to translate Discipline-specific jargon (Lonyangapuo, 2015). To mitigate, linguistic strategies such as interpretation, circumlocution, simplification, rephrasing, restating, language switch and avoidance have been used, which often negatively impact the intended semantics through misrepresentation, misinterpretation or withheld information that triggers wrong or no action, which ultimately impacts on societal well-being.

### **Future holistic Higher education in Kenya**

Based on the findings, we argue for holistic higher education in MU and Kenya at large that blends discipline-specific content (scientific and African Indigenous) communicated in an African language for specific purposes, besides the dominant instructional language. Specifically, we argue for the re/positioning of Kiswahili in STEM and (by extension, the AHSS) for a holistic education that adequately prepares professionals capable of utilising the acquired knowledge and skills for positive societal impact.

### **Conclusion**

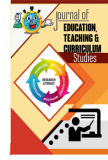
Despite the ideological stance that informs the current MU (by extension, Kenyan Universities) curricula, the impetus should be the need to produce graduates who can function optimally. The communication disconnects witnessed at the conceptual level are reflected in practice, where some professionals encounter challenges in knowledge and skills dissemination that call for linguistic adjustment. However, given the inability, some resort to less demanding communication strategies that adversely impact the communication objective. Consequently, the Kenyan cultural and linguistic landscape should be considered in curricula design and implementation to allow for majority involvement at all levels and for sustainable development. Finally, holistic higher education calls for multi-disciplinarity, with AHSS incorporated to enhance specific STEM programmes. Specifically, the Kiswahili component should be included in all STEM and other AHSS programmes for societal well-being.

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