

English language competence: Why English matters in higher education in Kenya

Ukaiko A. Bitrus-Ojiambo, Iddah Wayumba Mwaura, Annette Lutivini Majanja

Abstract

English is an international language, used in many countries for business, tourism, and education (Roy-Campbell, 2014; Crystal, 2003). In Kenya, it is the official language and language of instruction. The country boasts high youth literacy rates 93% (UNESCO, 2012). As university instructors, we have observed that although students have been in the formal educational system for a minimum of 9 years, their output does not match university expectations (KICD, 2016, p. 44; Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011; Njoroge, 2008). This study assesses English language use in a Kenyan institution of higher education, identifies emergent linguistic patterns, and suggests some solutions to observed gaps between emergent patterns of English use vis-à-vis Standard British English (SBE).

Key Words: world Englishes, Kenya, higher education

Introduction

English is an international language (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010; Crystal, 2003). In Anglophone developing countries it is the language of power, used formally and in educational systems (Farrell & Martin, 2009). Its initial spread is attributed to British colonial agendas and its quality of *productivity* (British Council, 2013; Finnegan, 2012). Indeed, *World Englishes* points to English varieties, also referred to as dialects of English (Finnegan, 2012; Schaetzel & Low, 2009). Thus, although one may speak the English language, due to its productive and adaptive nature, a 'pure' form of the language does not exist. Although often assumed to, English does not have the same function for non-native speakers as it does for native speakers within educational contexts (Roy-Campbell, 2014). Similarly, although English is pervasive, there is no global standard for it (Farrell & Martin, 2009; Kembo, 1995). This paper assesses the use of language in higher education in Kenya, identifies emergent patterns, and provides solutions for language proficiency and competence.

As university instructors, we have observed that written work from students is below expectations for the tertiary level of education. Considering that Kenyan university students have been within the formal educational system and studied Standard British English (SBE) for at least nine years (KICD, 2016, p. 44; Njoroge, 2008), and that Kenya boasts adult literacy rates

of eighty-seven percent and youth literacy rates at ninety-three percent raises the questions: *What difference is learning in English making to their linguistic repertoire? How can fluency and proficiency be enhanced?* Although the language of instruction and assessment in Kenyan universities is SBE, advanced linguistic proficiency and literacy levels are not attained. Kenyan universities assume students will have Standard British English first language (L1) user proficiency level; however, prior English proficiency does not transfer to linguistic competencies for academic purposes (Finnegan, 2012; UNESCO Fact Sheet, 2012; Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010).

Literature Review

Kenya, a country of about forty million people, has witnessed an expansion in the higher education sector from a few national universities to 70 chartered, publically or privately funded universities that operate physical campuses and distance and e-learning modes (CUE website). Based on indicated practice, students take from time-to-degree: four years (undergraduate), three years (Masters); and four years (Doctoral). They are expected to present written, original projects or theses in English at each level. The minimum standard for university admission is a C+ average attained in high school and/or stipulated equivalents (CUE Universities Standards Guide, 2014). Beyond this, no language guidelines or requirements are indicated. Kenyan Sign Language, which is SBE-based, is relatively new in the Kenyan academic context (Revised Constitution, 2007); and may present new concerns as a language variety linked to literacy, competency, and proficiency.

Language acquisition is informal, language instruction formal; when they learn in English, students formally learn the vocabulary for that subject (Njoroge, 2008). Vocabulary development is linked to developing accurate reading and writing skills, thus gaining English to proficiency (Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011). However, vocabulary development strategies (independent vocabulary learning, morphological units, dictionary use in other reference works, and the link between spelling and learning words) must be focused on in the first three years of primary school for an effect to be seen in later years (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004).

Although people in multilingual environments speak different languages with high proficiency, they may not read or write any of the languages (Roy-Campbell, 2014). When they read, they may have low comprehension, thus may not do well in other subjects because they have not developed the required language skills linked to reading, speaking, writing, and listening (Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011; Pikulski & Templeton, 2004). Similarly, it was found that Kenyan primary teachers with advanced degrees had more aligned English language abilities (especially grammar and phonology) to SBE (Njoroge, 2008). This implies that Kenyan university

students, who may be multilingual, should not be assumed to have proficiency in all English language domains. This is despite their nine years of studying English at primary and secondary levels.

Second language (L2) learners develop concurrent language proficiencies at various stages of the continuum: discrete language skills (e. g. alphabetic principles, vocabulary development), academic language proficiency varies for listening, reading, speaking, and writing, and conversational fluency (which varies with reading skills) (Cummins, 2003 in Roy-Campbell, 2014, p. 87). Adults with strong oral language skills in their native language are able to transfer those skills in learning a second language (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010). Proficiency is linked to “the amount of practice...in specific domains, and can be impacted by instruction” (Roy-Campbell, 2014, p. 87; Vinogradof & Bigelow, 2010). Language proficiency includes sound-symbol association and decoding skills (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010); and beyond the four language domains of readings, writing, speaking, and listening is the concept of digital literacies (Lotherington, 2004).

The conceptual framework for this paper (adapted from Finnegan, 2012) demonstrates that a Kenyan student’s environment (education, languages learned, literacy, and culture) interacts with their linguistic repertoire (grammatical and communicative competence) to then form what is the Communication Output (verbal and written communication). Knowledge of SBE semantics, syntax, phonetics, phonology, morphology and pragmatics alone is insufficient for the L2 learner to function in academic settings. Metalingustics training helps nonliterate adults in second language acquisition through learning phonological awareness (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010). The stronger literacy skills are in one’s first language, the easier it is to transfer literacy skills to other languages (L2s) (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010). Thus it is important for Kenyans to develop strong literacy skills in their L1; and it is important to find mechanisms to help adults with weak language skills to improve on L2.

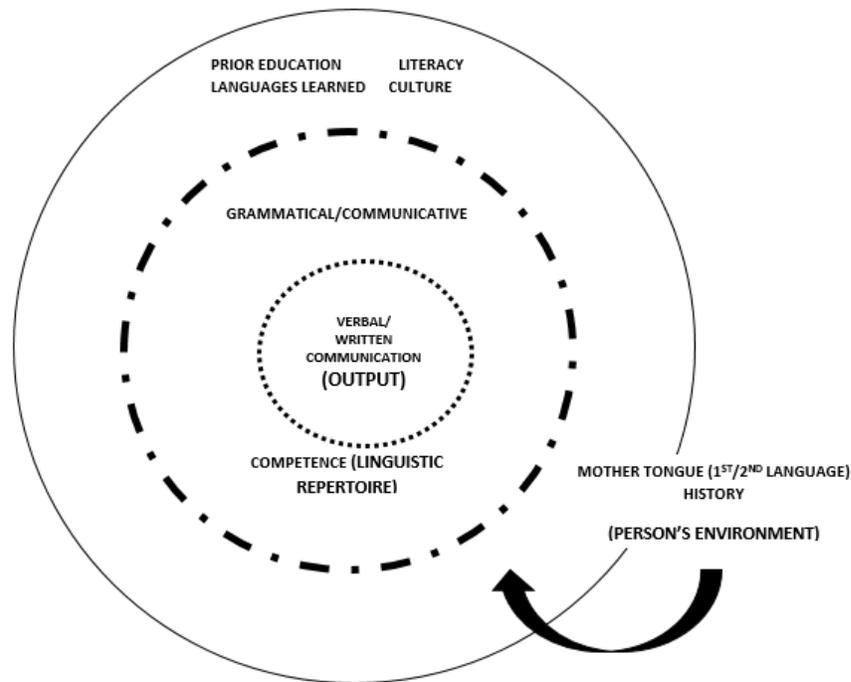


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Communication output shaped by linguistic repertoire and environment (adapted from Finnegan, 2012).

Methodology

Grounded theory was used for this study; allowing for the independent review of texts and observation of repeated linguistic patterns and/or variations of the same from Standard English. Grounded theory is a recursive, iterative approach that allows the data collection, note taking, and coding to occur concurrently (Bryman, 2012). Coding in qualitative research allows the researchers to review transcripts or data and label emergent categories (Bryman 2012); we coded, we compared categories to the writing samples and then explored the relationship between the categories. Coding allowed us to discover emergent themes: “grammatical (syntactic) errors,” “spelling errors,” “punctuation,” “native language interference or direct translation (contextualized meanings),” and “phonetics (narrative form or speech interference with text).”

Applying convenience sampling, participant writing samples were chosen to facilitate the examination of writing proficiency of students who just completed high school and writing samples of professional Kenyan writers. The writing samples were sorted to ensure clarity from: 1) writing assignments of twenty-four students enrolled in a thirteen-week mentorship program at a Kenyan university; 2) undergraduate assignments of seventeen freshmen (first year, first semester students at Kenyan university) in a course that exposes students to academic writing using APA (6th Ed.); 3) one sms

between one of the authors and a young intern, who had just completed high school and had not yet joined a university campus; and 4) media data sets from mainstream newspapers.

Findings

Youth mentorship student's work

Four emergent categories were found in this sample. The categories were all related to errors. Common error categories found were grammar, spelling (phonetics, lack of editing, variant stylistic spelling), punctuation, and native language interference. Much of the skill of students in grammar and phonology is linked to their teacher's skills and linguistic abilities (Njoroge, 2008). Kenyan teachers who did not have advanced training demonstrated a gap between actual English language abilities (grammar and phonetics) and SBE. Samples from the Youth mentorship student's work showed:

Grammatical errors

Back in primary I would alway think of the big careers like a doctor, pilot, dentist and many more...I learn soo many things. Am a person whom would not like to just sit around...

Spelling errors

Proffesionalls ("Professionals"); "i" (repeated severally in work)

Phonetic

I was living home ("leaving"); I was ment to do ("Meant"); ...not forgetting my forks who inspired and pushed me on... ("Folks;" use of Slang); ...made me busy rather than being idol in the house ("Idle").

Native language interference

"For years and years on..." (Swahili: *miaka na miaka*)

Undergraduate assignments

Students were instructed to brainstorm three topics that they could adapt into a term paper; develop a one-paragraph introduction and conclusion; and three resources. They were to type and submit the work. Seventeen of thirty-five student assignments were sampled. Undergraduate

students are pressured to pass exams and improve their social status (Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011). Thus English is a means to an end. Emergent categories were narrative form, and punctuation and syntactic errors. Samples from the undergraduate work:

Introduction and thesis, and body

Introductions. The introductions were not presented as full paragraphs, but rather as bulleted lists (without the actual bullets) that were kept close to original formats as would be found in theses. For example:
To evaluate individuals and groups the level of intervention approaches they undertake while in pressure.

Examining ways of effective stress management among professionals.
To equip the professionals with skills and techniques to help them manage stress with ease.

Body. *The body* in terms of three subtopics was incomplete; some students did not present this portion all together. Only one student attempted the thesis statement and even then it was not well-articulated; rather it was presented as an “objective.” See the sample below under the topic of “Child abuse”.

Students did not use the required font (instead Calibri, 14 was used), and no citation was included. An example of a definition that was presented without a citation and a run on sentence is:

CHILD ABUSE DEFINITION

This is action that causes injury through death emotional harm or risk of serious harm to the child by an elderly person to a child.

OBJECTIVES

1. To determine causes of child abuse among children
2. To determine challenges faced by children being abused
3. To identify effects of child abuse among children
4. Measures to be taken to prevent and reduce child abuses cases among children

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Working together to safeguard children [DfES 2006]
2. Prevention of cruelty to children in 2000 [Cowson 2000]

THESIS

To determine preventive measures and solutions to eradicated child abuse

References and in-text citation

In-text citation. Sixteen assignments lacked in-text citations, only one student included it though the citation was incomplete. References were listed, though not on a separate page, one student did not include a reference page at all, sixteen students had combinations of only call numbers, ISBN, and authors names (some full, others a combination of last names and initials). In all the work presented there was direct copy-pasting from source without quotations.

Font, type, line spacing. Font size and typographical style were also not adhered to consistently; eight students used Times New Roman 12 Font, with a combination of line spacing (from single-to-unstructured, so it was not clear what they presented). Others used Calibri/Arial, with variations in sizes 8-14.

Grammar and punctuation. Grammar, punctuation, spelling (from phonetics), and punctuation were typical problems; transitions were not used. For example:

Grammatical errors:

1. Back in primary I would alway think of the big careers like a doctor, pilot, dentist and many more...I learn soo many things.
2. Am a person whom would not like to just sit around in an office all by myself but rather be out there socialise and make friends.
3. I realised all kind of careers have job opportunities that there are.
4. My inspiration started a long time back...
5. I am hopping to gain the skills necessary in life...
6. Because the rain was so much destructive...

Spelling errors:

1. The roads to that destination were awefull and this was not very pleasing to us as the travellers.
2. Proffessionalls
3. "i" (repeated severally in work)
4. Though it may not be a big tittle but realy thats what I have seen and pictured myself to do...

5. I was living home: Phonetic error that affected the spelling of “leaving”
6. I was ment to do: Phonetic error, “Meant”
7. ...not forgetting my forks who inspired and pushed me on...:
Phonetic: “Folks;” Slang
8. ...made me busy rather than being idol in the house: Phonetic: “Idle”

Kenyan Newspapers

Three stories each from three newspapers were reviewed: The Standard newspaper, The Star, and Daily Nation. Common errors included: grammar (“Teething hiccups,” incorrect use of phrases, run-on sentences, redundancy “reverts back to them”), spelling (compound word presented with the ‘plus sign,’ fast+track), and missing punctuation. Newspaper reading was found to be directly related to higher proficiency in reading and writing, and specifically improved grammar and syntax among Sri Lankan university freshmen (Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011).

Sample SMSs

This text conversation demonstrates the use of *Sheng*, a nativized variety of English used in Kenya. The individual texting uses a phonetically-based variety of English, homophones, numeric and alphanumeric codes, and consistently does not use punctuation to separate ideas and thoughts:

Text 2: “*Aki amsory am very confused am on ma way bt traffiktis a problem plz pas ma apology 4 being late*” (Gosh, I’m sorry. I’m very confused. I’m on my way, but traffic is a problem. Please pass my apology for being late).

Text 3: “*Hae [name]? Due to certain rezns I wn’t be able to kam todai plz pas ma apology nd if we ar going 2morrow plz lemi knw*” (Hi [name]? Due to certain reasons I won’t be able to come today. Please pass my apology and if we are going tomorrow please let me know).

Text 6: “*Danx*” (Thanks). (Transfer error from local language to digital lingo)

Discussion

The student assignments and news stories demonstrated the underdeveloped state of academic and professional discourse that employs SBE while the sms fits into the norms for *digital lingo* (Lotherington, 2004). That the same errors were made in assignments completed outside of class when students had more time to prepare, proofread and edit as well as in class tests, points to a deeper issue than language acquisition (Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011; Crystal, 2003). Although Kenyan primary school

students continue to have formal exposure in the four language domains: writing, spelling, listening and speaking, they do not have L1 proficiency in these domains (Nyargoti, 2013). It was found that primary school teachers with advanced degrees were able to narrow the gap in grammatical and phonological errors with regards to SBE proficiency (Njoroge, 2008). In the higher education context, instructional strategies for L2 language learners may be helpful in this context (Burt et. al., 2008); in helping learners self-correct and monitor their expressions; use technology to learn to listen to cues; learn through peer and contextual interactions (Lotherington, 2004; Harris, n.d.).

From the emergent core patterns (grammatical, spelling, native language interference) and repeated errors, we see that the professed SBE is far from being internalized (thus affecting output, theory of communicative and linguistic competence). The academic language being SBE is shallowly grasped and presents itself as a foreign language (L2) in usage, although the assumption is that it is the students' L1 (Jayasundara & Premarathna, 2011). University lecturers are required to have a minimum master's level qualification to teach in Kenya (CUE regulation). It was found that those secondary teachers who attained masters level training acquired an English variety is close to the SBE in skill and pronunciation (Njoroge, 2008). Currently, the language used by students is functional (Nga, 2008), and used as a means of assessment. When students own the language, research outputs may begin to conform to an academic standard (in this case SBE), as is seen by the South African educational system that uses its own English variety and accepts academic work in localized languages. This demonstrates that Kenya could stand to resolve the issue of lack of linguistic standard that is localized, if it were to embrace the idea of its own codified English variety for the academic context. In this way, the academic language could be learned from kindergarten and or primary one instead of later. Until then, strategies used for teaching adult language learners (L2) can help in language development to self-monitor, grow vocabularies, learn contextually and with peers, and use technology to allow for practice with native speakers (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010).

Policy level dialogue is needed with all stakeholders as to the desired processes and outcomes of higher education in Kenya and about what languages are to be used within its educational system. Questions to ask could include "What norms of the current language-in-education policy need to be kept and why?"

If language is shaped and agreed upon by those in the Kenyan higher education language community (Verderber et. al., 2010), then Kenyan educators need to consider how the language being used is advancing both local and global participation. Currently, what appears to be the practice is that students learn in national languages until primary without having grasped linguistic rules in those languages and then start learning English

to learn subject matter they will be tested on for their Primary and Secondary exit exams. This means that English becomes a dominant language that is not grasped well (Jayasundara, & Premarathna, 2011). Literacies in native languages allow for transferred skills and competence in academic languages, L2 (Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010). Perhaps what we see happening in this context is extended hegemony with SBE promulgating ‘cultural baggage’—even though the language itself continues to change. Other countries now have their (national) English varieties (as with Singapore and South Africa); however, English use on the continent and in the country is not only stagnating, but is also retrogressive in that students end up being regurgitators of information to pass tests but not transferors and creators of knowledge and participators on the global stage.

That Kenyans have not developed a Kenyan English and established it as a legitimate English variety further perpetuates problems in the context of academic language in Kenya. This includes the open stigmatization and lack of codification of local and creolized languages. The uncritical, pragmatic use of SBE within educational and professional spheres means that it continues to be used with inaccuracies. Thus academics need to consider how the language they are using and perpetuating for academic purposes is hegemonic; as it continues to exclude marginalized groups who are not literate in SBE due to the underdevelopment of vocabulary and lack of resources in their regions and counties. In tandem with findings and communicative competence theory (Finnegan, 2012), the outcome should not be accurate adherence to SBE. Rather, the aim should be mutual understanding and self-driven strategies for accommodation and participation within a global context (Schaetzel & Low, 2009).

Conclusion

English linguistic competence and proficiency continues to matter because it is a global language of instruction. However, there is a need to recognize that it is an evolving language with roots in the Indo-European language family and new influences from technology applications: new and/or blended words as ‘text, Twitter, and *chillaxing* and abbreviated grammatical forms are now part of English linguistic repertoires (Finnegan, 2012; Lotherington, 2004). Academic language exposes students to fixed ways of expression and thinking (Jayasundara, & Premarathna, 2011); for L2 learners this means the need to learn linguistic strategies and communication accommodations beyond basic interpersonal communication skills (Cummins, 1979). In the Kenyan context, we would recommend that linguistic competence and accuracy be advanced, *but not just in English*. Indeed, codification and standardization of local languages, and linguistic literacies (in the four language domains and including digital) would be beneficial for Kenyans. Lastly, we advocate for Kenya’s global participation through promoting its own variety so that once

codified, it can expand *others' linguistic repertoires* to understand yet another language variety. In the academic arena, literature, research, and innovations would then be possible from localized and contextualized positions.

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Ukaiko A. Bitrus-Ojiambo is a human communication instructor in the Department of Communication Studies at St. Paul's University, Kenya. Her scholarly interests and contributions are in media analysis and higher education. She also facilitates faculty development training. Her academic backgrounds are a BA in Psychology (USIU-A) and MA in Communication (USA).

Iddah Wayumba Mwaura is a Lecturer in the Department of Communication at St. Paul's University in Limuru, Kenya. She holds a Master of Arts Degree in Communication from the University of Nairobi and an Undergraduate Degree in Education (English and Literature) from Moi University in Kenya. Her interests are in Language and Communication Competencies.

Annette Lutivini Majanja lives in Nairobi, Kenya. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland, College Park and a BA in Language and Communication from the University of Nairobi. She is a fiction writer whose short stories have been published in *Jalada*, *Lawino Magazine*, *Mcsweeney's* and *Kikwetu*. She has also translated on of her stories into the Isukha language.