

Reflections on the Reading Competence in English of  
Secondary School Students in Tanzania: The Cultural Aspect

By

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1 INTRODUCTION

Progressive literature on foreign and second language learning has always underlined the interaction of various factors that contribute to the learner's competence in the target language. Burstall (1975) broadly discusses these factors under two main headings, motivation and age. Factors listed under motivation include: integrative versus instrumental motivation for learning the language, contact with the culture of the target language, the socio-economic background of the learner, sex differences of the learners and the teacher-pupil interaction. Secondly, he discusses the question of whether there is an optimum age for foreign language learning. Burstall (1975) draws the following conclusions based on his study and those of others. He supports the thesis that instrumental motivation and parents' support for foreign language and parents' evaluation of its relevance to their children's employment prospects are more influential than integrative motivation. Secondly, contact with the representatives of the foreign language culture is important in the development of positive attitudes and in the achievement of linguistic competence. His study also led him to conclude that the socio-economic background of the learner plays an important role in the competence that the learner achieves in the foreign language. Children with parents in higher-status occupations tend to receive more parental support when they approach new learning experiences than do those with parents

in lower-status occupations. In addition, studies cited by Burstall (1975) tend to support the view that sex differences in achievement are present and that girls perform better in foreign languages than boys. Discussing the teacher-pupil interaction factor, he asserts that a close relationship exists between the teacher's attitude and expectations and the pupil's attitude and achievement. Finally, his conclusion on the age factor is (Burstall 1975:21):

Thus the most conservative interpretation which the available evidence would appear to permit is that the achievement of skills in a foreign language is primarily a function of time spent studying that language, but is also affected by the age of the learner, older learners tending to be more efficient than younger ones. Penfield's contention that the first ten years of life constitute a "critical period" for foreign-language acquisition remains unsupported by direct experimental evidence.

In a study carried out on the reading of primary school learners of French as a foreign language, Cox (1968) investigates the contribution of the following factors: the student's ability to learn, the school and the staff, the interaction between the school, the learner and the method of teaching and the learner's home background. The key problem the author raises is how best to provide for the needs of children who are below average in ability and who are further handicapped by an unfavourable home background. There are controversies regarding the relative importance of these factors; their effects will vary according to the group of learners and the learning environment.



While recognizing that the studies referred to in Burstall (1975) and that carried out by Cox (1968) are based on learners whose experience is different from that of Tanzanian secondary school students, we believe that many of the factors discussed are relevant for Tanzanian learners as well.

In their study of Tanzanian secondary school students, Roy-Campbell and Qorro (1987) find a generally poor performance on reading tests administered in target schools. In addition, they note that nearly half of the students that sat for the Tanzania national form IV examination in 1986 failed in English. The poor performance in this language, which is also the medium of instruction at secondary level, seemed to lead to a corresponding drop in the student's level of performance in other academic subjects. The two authors discuss several factors which contribute to this situation, including the linguistic background of the students, the way English is taught, the quality of the teachers and their competence in English, the lack of textbooks and reading materials in general, the readability of available materials and the learning environment.

While we agree with the authors on the importance of these factors, we would like to approach the problem of competence in English and that of reading in English particularly from a cultural perspective. The two key problems that will be addressed are: 1. the place of English in the Tanzanian cultural context and 2. how the lack of a long tradition of reading in our society hinders the learning of reading in general and particularly that of English.

## 2 ENGLISH IN THE TANZANIAN CULTURE

English has never been associated with the expression of the popular mass culture of indigenous Tanzanians. When the colonial government introduced English it became a symbol and tool of upward social mobility, enabling those who mastered it to have access to the material benefits and prestige associated with the language. English thus served to create a division among the local people, differentiating the educated elite from the masses. The higher the Africans climbed up the educational ladder, the more acculturated they became, divorced from their local culture and yet not fully embracing the culture of the colonial power or being accepted by it. The aim of the colonial government was to educate a small group of Africans to serve its interests and English was a powerful tool in that process.

Swahili is the language that was used by T.A.N.U. (The Tanganyika African National Union) leaders to rally and mobilize the people during the struggle for independence and was therefore closely associated with the emergence of the new independent state and nation. After independence, English continued to be an official language but Swahili started to gain ground (Whitelay, 1969; Trappes-Lomax, Besha and Mcha, 1987). Its adoption in government affairs and other spheres of public life was a recognition of the potential that the language had as a tool for expressing the unity and culture of the new nation. The introduction of Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level was part and parcel of the general social, economic and cultural change. Roy-Campbell and Qorro (1987:85-86) correctly summarize the situation in the following assertion: "In 1967 Tanzania initiated a process which paved the way for cultural change in the society. By implementing the decision to use Swahili as the medium of instruction at primary school level, Tanzania enabled basic



education to become more accessible to the majority of the population".

While English was the second language for educated Tanzanians (because of its official language status) during the colonial period and the early years of independence, it has progressively lost that status since 1967, so much so that it has in effect become a foreign language even for most educated Tanzanians. Its weak position is partly explained by the fact that it has no roots in the society and it does not fulfill an intranational function as it does in countries such as India or Indonesia (Smith, 1981). Given this situation, it is not surprising that competence in the language has fallen (Trappes-Lomax, Besha and Mcha, 1982; Roy-Campbell and Qorro, 1987), especially after the Arusha Declaration which introduced a new ideology geared towards a new social development strategy that rural oriented, to be spread through the medium of Swahili. The drop in the level of competence in English has been enhanced by another factor, namely the lack of a strong cultural foundation for reading in general.

### 3 READING IN THE TANZANIAN SOCIETY

In discussing problems associated with reading, Roy-Campbell and Qorro (1987:3) state "Since secondary school education should produce independent readers, there should be a lot of reading at increasingly difficult levels, with much of the reading being done outside the classroom, without the direct guidance of the teacher."

While recognizing the importance of this statement, we would like to caution that all things being equal (available and appropriate reading materials, competent teachers, motivated learners, etc.), students may still have an inadequate

reading competence. This is because the culture of reading is relatively recent, and is limited to certain sections of the population, often depending on the educational level and socio-economic status of individuals.

Even though Swahili has existed as a written language for hundreds of years (Whiteley 1969), a broad-based culture of reading in our society was only introduced much later by missionaries and by the two colonial governments. From the very beginning learning to read and write had a very specific instrumental function, as a ladder to employment in the church or in the government. Today, many Tanzanians hope that education will lead to paid employment. But aside from this rather limited, functional learning, there would appear to be little reading for "pleasure" or as a leisure passtime. Yet it is this very type of "recreational" reading of books on subjects of special interest to the reader that is likely to help in gaining and improving reading competence. In the present cultural milieu in which a student acquires his education, there is often a lack of a conducive environment for reading at home and at school.

### 3.1 Home background

The majority of Tanzanian students come from rural homes where little reading is done on a regular basis. However, the situation in some urban areas may be better than in the rural zones. The literacy level among adults has improved considerably since independence; in 1986 90.4% of the adult population was considered literate while only 31% of the population was literate in 1967, six years after independence (Sumra and Bwatwa, 1988). But there are still many parents who do not know how to read and write. It would be interesting to know what percentage of the literate



practise reading on a regular basis and for how long after they have become literate they continue such reading.

In addition, how many Tanzanians have any leisure time, especially in rural areas, and how many spend it reading? How many people among educators, especially teachers at different levels, engage in reading that is not directly connected to their work? Our point here is to underline again that only a very limited portion of the population engages in leisure reading of books.

It is presumed that the majority of Tanzanians do most of their reading in Swahili, and that adults who read English at home constitute a very small percentage of the population. Reading materials available in the home are often very limited. They may consist only of religious books, newspapers and magazines, with few or no other books available. Buying books and other reading materials is financially difficult for most Tanzanians. It is logical to assume that the lack of reading materials in English in Tanzanian homes is more serious than the lack of materials in Swahili. The percentage of Tanzanian families that have reading materials in English suitable for students is also limited. In addition, the majority of homes do not have facilities such as suitable reading lights. The Tanzanian student therefore often starts the process of formal education with very little material and cultural support from the home environment.

The Tanzania Library Service has branches at regional centres and the Institute of Adult Education has rural libraries at ward level and in many villages. The Ministry of Education has also helped with books at district level. However, it still has to be shown what percentage of the population actually makes use of these book centres for reading (Kilindo, 1980).

### 3.2 The school environment

It must be stressed that the majority of students speak a local language or mother tongue, and only learn Swahili when they start primary school. In most primary schools, there is a very limited number of textbooks and other reading materials. Classrooms are overcrowded and teachers are overworked. A single primary school teacher may have to try to teach more than 100 pupils in one classroom. Many of the pupils have no desks and must try to learn while sitting on the floor. There have been complaints that many students finish primary school with only a limited competence in reading and writing. The reintroduction of the Standard Four examination is mainly to screen such pupils who gain little from their primary education. Many of the pupils finishing primary school have unsatisfactory competence in reading Swahili, the national language and the medium of instruction at primary school level.

While still struggling to learn to read and write in Swahili, the pupil is introduced to English in standard three; this is a foreign language that he cannot relate to and does not use except in the classroom. While most students actually use Swahili in their homes, especially in urban areas, the number of families of indigenous Tanzanians that use English in their homes must be extremely limited. There is thus almost no opportunity for the student to practise oral or written English in the home to re-inforce what he learns in school. Very often, the spoken and written forms of English are introduced at the same time or at very short intervals.

Even at secondary level, very few students have access to textbooks or other reading materials, and again, the overcrowded classrooms and overworked teachers make it difficult for students to learn the language well. Roy-



#### 4 CONCLUSION

We have attempted to explain that the habit of reading in general and that of recreational reading for pleasure in particular are often not part of our cultural background. In addition to other well-known problems, affecting the learning of a second language, this cultural factor is important in the development of an acceptable reading competence in English. Although this cultural aspect has in the past been largely ignored, we cannot afford to overlook its importance.

While the past and future role of Swahili as Tanzania's national language cannot be overemphasized, it is also important to recognise the importance of English as an international language. If English is to continue as a medium of instruction in Tanzanian schools, ways will have to be devised to encourage students to develop a broad interest in reading. The provision of appropriate reading materials, improvement in training of teachers, and general improvements to the educational system can only lead to better competence in reading if the importance of such competence is recognised and encouraged by society as a whole.

Tanzania has a rapidly growing population; 50% of Tanzanians are aged 15 years or younger. The issues raised above are of critical importance if Tanzanians are to achieve reasonable competence in reading in general. Very little published data appears to be available on such basic questions as: which book titles in English and Kiswahili sell best to which age groups in Tanzania? Is there a statistically significant difference between reading competence between urban and rural dwellers? Are there male, female differences in reading competence, and if so, are there cultural and social explanations for these?

What types of reading material in both languages are regarded as desirable by different age groups? How much leisure time is available for recreational reading in urban and rural households? What is the general attitude towards recreational reading in English? Who are the major users of libraries? Without the answers to these and many more questions, it will be difficult to develop a rational strategy towards solving the cultural problems, associated with reading competency in Tanzania.



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