The Illusion of Relevance: English as Language of Instruction in Vocational Education Centres in Tanzania

Wakati Maliva
Department of Educational Psychology and Curriculum Studies, Mkwawa University College of Education, Iringa, Tanzania
Email: wakati.maliva@muce.ac.tz; mwamaliva105@hotmail.com
ORCID No: 0000-0001-8810-7459

Abstract

This paper reviews Tanzanian key policy documents, namely, Education for Self-Reliance (1967), the Education and Training Policy, the Technical Education and Training Policy (1996), and the Tracer Study Report for 2010–2015 VET Graduates (2019), to assess the suitability of English as a medium of instruction in Vocational Education and Training centres. Linguistic imperialism theory is used to examine whether using a foreign language supports effective skills acquisition. Findings indicate that cognitive skills are effectively developed when instruction occurs in a familiar language. Consequently, the intended benefits of vocational education are undermined by language barriers. The paper recommends adopting Kiswahili to achieve vocational education objectives.

Keywords: *vocational education and training, foreign language, English, Tanzania, linguistic imperialism*

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1. Introduction

Vocational education has been defined as post-compulsory education and training, excluding degrees and higher-level programmes delivered by higher education institutions, that provide people with occupational or work-related knowledge and skills (Klassen, 2024). Vocational education has the potential to alleviate poverty and improve youth employment in both low – and middle-income countries worldwide (Shi & Bangpan, 2022). This potential has led to close cooperation between public vocational centres and enterprises to acquire skilled employees (Dettmann & Gunther, 2013). Furthermore, participation in vocational education has helped youth build cultural and social capital and foster aspirations, alongside the economic consequences that are primary to youth participation in national development.

Worldwide, vocational training aims to equip its trainees with the skills necessary for the development of the society in which they live. Despite the massive support that general education receives from international organisations such as UNESCO, the World Bank, and UNICEF, vocational education has largely been financed by individual nations (Klassen, 2024; Li & Pilz, 2023). Despite interest in vocational education, international organisations have not been directly involved in its provision. Vocational education receives little emphasis from international organisations because it involves more youths who could not excel in general education (King, 1993). In many parts of Africa, parents and society view vocational training colleges as places where failures go. It is from this orientation that vocational education receives less attention than general education, even though it provides direct and immediate benefits to both the individual recipient and society.

In Africa, vocational training colleges take the majority of youth who have completed primary and secondary education. Those who join vocational training colleges after secondary education may not have made it through formal education and take it as their last resort. One reason students are unable to pursue formal education is the use of foreign languages (UNESCO, 1997). The belief that a foreign language is best for educational provision in secondary education and beyond extends to vocational training colleges in some African nations. This paper evaluates the use of foreign language as a language of instruction in vocational training colleges in terms of the value the language adds to skills acquisition in students, whether foreign language is needed by the people these students serve after they graduate and the impact of the foreign language, particularly English, in the provision of vocational education and training in Tanzania.

2. Historical and Contemporary Context of Vocational Education in Africa and Tanzania

2.1 Precolonial Vocational Training in Africa

Precolonial Africa was marked by rich vocational education practices tailored to the specific needs and socio-economic activities of different communities. These practices were informal but highly effective, rooted in apprenticeship, community involvement, and the transfer of indigenous knowledge. In Egypt, vocational education focused on advanced skills in agriculture and engineering, as evidenced by the construction of monumental structures such as the pyramids, which required expertise in quarrying, masonry, and irrigation techniques for the Nile River's fertile plains (Diop, 1987). In Tanzania, the agricultural Bantu communities trained youth in farming techniques, iron smelting, and

fishing practices, ensuring survival in the fertile regions around Lake Victoria (Kimambo, 1969).

Similarly, in Ethiopia, where terraced farming in the highlands was a crucial practice, knowledge of soil conservation and livestock management was passed down from generation to generation. Additionally, traditional craft industries such as weaving and pottery were vital to local economies (Pankhurst, 1968). Zimbabwe was renowned for its stone construction techniques, exemplified by the Great Zimbabwe ruins, where young artisans learned masonry and architectural skills under the guidance of master builders (Beach, 1994). In Ghana, the Ashanti Kingdom fostered apprenticeship in goldsmithing, weaving, and blacksmithing, which were integral to trade and cultural expression (Boahen, 1975). Across these regions, vocational training was practical, community-based, and intertwined with cultural and spiritual values. Elders and specialists served as teachers, ensuring continuity of essential skills and promoting societal cohesion. While informal, this system of education laid the foundation for economic and social stability.

2.2. Vocational Education in Tanzania

Vocational education in Tanzania began before colonialism, when children were taught by their parents what a particular society considered its main economic activity through practice. If societies engaged in agriculture, fishing, or animal husbandry, children in those societies would be oriented to them. More advanced vocational activities involved preparing equipment to facilitate the main economic activities, such as making hoes and other agricultural tools or making fishing equipment. Other vocational education during the time involved medicine, where few people in society were oriented to it. Generally, vocational education during the precolonial era aimed to help society conduct its economic activities smoothly by providing the necessary equipment.

Vocational and training in Tanzania are under the supervision of the Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA). The importance of vocational education and training in Tanzania is to prepare vocational graduates with the skills and knowledge needed for employability in both formal and informal establishments (VETA, 2019). Three of the functions of VETA are: "to provide vocational training opportunities, and facilities for such training; to establish a vocational education and training system which includes both basic and specialised training to meet the needs of both the formal and the informal sectors; to satisfy the demands of the labour market for employees with trade skills in order to improve production and productivity of the economy" (VETA, 2019, p.3). Table 1 indicates the potential candidates for vocational education

and training from primary schools.

Table 1

Number and Percentage of Potential Candidates for Vocational Education from Primary Schools (2004–2016)

Year	Standard Seven Students	Joined Secondary School (n)	(%)	Did Not Join Secondary (n)	(%)
2004	449,241	180,239	36.1	269,002	63.9
2005	493,946	243,359	49.3	250,587	50.7
2006	664,263	448,448	67.5	215,815	32.5
2007	773,553	433,904	57.5	339,649	42.5
2008	1,017,865	524,784	51.6	493,081	48.4
2009	999,070	438,827	43.9	560,243	56.1
2010	894,889	467,155	53.6	427,734	46.4
2011	973,812	522,379	59.5	451,433	40.5
2012	865,534	514,592	52.0	350,942	48.0
2013	844,938	439,816	52.5	405,122	47.5
2014	792,118	451,332	57.0	340,786	43.0
2015	763,603	538,835	70.6	224,768	29.4
2016	789,479	553,742	70.1	235,737	29.9
Total	**10,322,311**	**5,757,412**		**4,564,899**	

Source: President's office, Regional Administration and Local Government (PROLAG, 2018)

From Table 1, of the 10,322,311 candidates who sat for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) from 2004 to 2016, 4,564,899 did not manage to join secondary education. This number is approximately 44.22% of all candidates in the said period, a group that is potentially suitable for vocational education and training centres. In addition, after completing four years of secondary education, some candidates are unable to attend high school. This group adds to the number of potential candidates for vocational training colleges.

Furthermore, a tracer study conducted between 2010 and 2015 found that those who joined vocational education and training centres came from primary education, secondary education, high school, other formal employment establishments, self-employment, formal apprenticeship, and informal apprenticeship, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Sources From Which Vocational Education and Training Candidates Come

Activity Before Joining VET	n	%	Cumulative %
Primary education	377	12	12
Secondary education	2,197	68	80
High school	35	1	81
Employed in formal establishments	158	5	86
Self-employed	326	10	96
Formal apprentice	31	1	97
Informal apprentice	89	3	100

Source: VETA, 2019

Table 2 shows that most candidates joined vocational education and training centres after secondary education, accounting for 68%. Other sources from which students came included primary education (12%), self-employment (10%), formal employment (5%), informal employment (3%), high school (1%), and formal apprenticeship (1%) (VETA, 2019). Although this data comes from a tracer study and does not include all students in vocational education and training, they provide a picture of the sources from which students come before they join vocational education and training.

In Tanzania, secondary education is offered in English as the medium of instruction in all compulsory subjects except two: Kiswahili and *Historia ya Tanzania na Maadili*. There has been a debate over whether to continue using English as the medium of instruction, as poor performance in secondary education has been partly attributed to its use. Several researchers have suggested that Kiswahili should replace English in secondary education (Vuzo, 2010; Qorro, 2012; Kawonga & Maliva, 2018). Building on this argument, Kawonga & Maliva (2018) recommend that Kiswahili should replace all foreign languages in the East African education system. They argue that Kiswahili is a Bantu language that developed from a combination of many East and Central African languages. They further argue that if Kiswahili replaced foreign languages in education provision in the region, education would be more meaningful, and what is learnt in school would easily diffuse into and benefit societies, resulting in development. The call to use Kiswahili in place of foreign languages in East Africa is made with the awareness that both teachers and students have limited mastery of English and French. Low mastery of foreign languages not only deprives learners of their cultural rights but also hinders smooth teaching and

learning processes. The Tanzanian education and training policy states that teaching and learning are more beneficial when the language used is familiar to both learners and teachers (URT, 2023).

The policy contradicts itself by giving English the same weight in both teaching and learning processes in Tanzania. This provision makes the public more inclined to English than to Kiswahili. Statement 3.10.3 of the policy regarding English in education states that "The National Language, Kiswahili, will be used to teach subjects aimed at building and developing the ethics, traditions, customs, and culture of Tanzanians at all levels of education and training". From the year 2024, the secondary education in Tanzania offers four subjects in Kiswahili, two of which are compulsory, namely Historia ya Tanzania na Maadili (Tanzanian History and Ethics [author's translation]) and Kiswahili itself; the other two, Elimu ya Dini ya Kiislamu (Islamic Knowledge) and Fasihi ya Kiswahili (Kiswahili Literature) are optional (URT, 2023). This can be seen as a move towards making Kiswahili be used in secondary schools.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper uses Phillipson's linguistic imperialism theory to explain the use of English, a foreign language, in teaching vocational education students in Tanzania. Phillipson, quoting Praisework (1980) argues that linguistic imperialism manifests itself through racist affirmation by means of self-exaltation on the part of the dominant group which creates an idealistic image of itself; devaluation of the dominated group and the suppression and stagnation of its culture, institutions and ideas; and finally, the dominant culture systematically rationalises the relationship between both groups, always favourable to the dominant group. Additionally, linguistic imperialists use terms such as 'ethnic', 'dialect' and 'vernacular' to refer to dominated languages. Speakers of the dominant language feel inferior in the presence of speakers of the dominant language (Phillipson, 2012). Dominant language speakers use these strategies to advance their cultural and linguistic domination.

Phillipson (2012) reiterates that the use of one language generally implies the exclusion of others, and that dominant languages strive at the expense of other languages in Africa, Latin America, and Australia. For example, English linguistic imperialism forges itself into society and individuals who are bilingual and multilingual by nature. Many linguistically rich countries have their languages dying due to English influence, as people neglect their languages in favour of English. By so doing, former British colonies are made to believe that English is the only language that can best be used to deliver knowledge. The influence of educated people in dominant-language societies

leads the whole society to believe that education provision is impossible without the use of foreign languages. As a result, policies developed by the elite continue to favour English even in places where indigenous languages would work best (Klassen, 2024).

The use of English as the medium of instruction in vocational education exemplifies linguistic imperialism. Although the choice of language for education is made by authorities in the respective countries, those who decide which language should be used were educated in the same foreign languages. Decision makers, throughout their exposure to British culture and education, were led to believe that knowledge and skills are best acquired when offered in English (Beiler, 2022). The belief that English must be used in education has dominated education in many former British colonies, including Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Nigeria, and many others. English is retained as the language of education despite the challenges learners face when using a foreign language (Vuzo, 2010; Masala, 2021; Fussy & Iddy, 2024). One of the reasons given for the decision to use English is to make education recipients global citizens. There is another misconception about English because many other international languages are spoken around the globe. Therefore, a language that is familiar to learners is suitable for deep learning (Pinxteren, 2022). Good examples exist in our midst where we see the Chinese scattered all over Africa in construction sites, and none of them speaks English, nor do they speak our languages.

In the context of vocational training, language serves not only as a medium of instruction but also as a critical tool for accessing technical knowledge and performing practical tasks. Theories of multilingualism suggest that learning a foreign language can have cognitive challenges. For example, Cummins (2000) discusses the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) required for academic success in a second language, which can be more demanding than Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS). With a particular interest in Tanzania, Adamson (2020) argues that English-medium education dominates in postcolonial countries and that the use of an unfamiliar medium of instruction has negatively affected learning. Along those lines, Phillipson (2012) concludes that the continued use of dominant languages in education results in sustained underdevelopment of the dominated languages and cultures. Therefore, the continued use of foreign languages in Africa, and Tanzania in particular, contradicts the massive efforts to fight poverty and underdevelopment.

Regardless of many factors that contribute to students' performance, failure in education is always attributed to the individual. This occurs regardless of

whether the system itself caused the failure. In general education, for example, the use of a foreign language may lead to poor performance, but all the blame is shouldered on students (Qorro et al., 2012; Phillipson, 2012). In defence of linguistic imperialism, Copland, Davis, Garton and Mann (2016) claimed that English is a global language of engineering, science, trade, finance and diplomacy. However, their claim is made despite English being spoken by fewer than 20 per cent of the world's population. This raises a critical question: which languages are used for these functions by the remaining 80 per cent? In response, Phillipson (2016, p. 83) strongly refutes this assertion, stating, "The claim that English is the sole language worldwide in which such functions are carried out is nonsense, reflecting British ignorance and ethnocentrism".

4. Methodology

This study adopted a narrative literature review to synthesise existing knowledge and generate new insights (Snyder, 2019). When conducted rigorously, literature reviews serve as a powerful methodological approach for consolidating and advancing knowledge in a specific research area (Palmatier et al., 2018). Narrative or semi-systematic reviews are particularly useful for shaping future research agendas on focused topics (Mgaiwa, 2021). Guided by the aim of examining the relevance of language of instruction in vocational education, the review focused on key policy and institutional documents: *Education for Self-Reliance* (1967), the *Education and Training Policy* (2023 edition of the 2014 policy), the *Technical Education and Training Policy in Tanzania* (1996), and the *Tracer Study Report for 2010–2015 Vocational Education and Training Graduates* (2019). The review sought to determine whether the use of a foreign language supports or undermines vocational education goals and to recommend an appropriate language policy for instruction. The findings are intended to inform future research and policy discussions in Tanzania and other contexts where foreign languages dominate vocational education. To integrate and interpret the reviewed materials, a thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework. Thematic analysis enables systematic identification, examination, and reporting of patterns within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Using this approach, the selected documents were coded and organised into themes that address the relevance of foreign language use in vocational education and training.

5. Findings

5.1 Language of Instruction in General Education

Monolingual countries do not have problems with the choice of language of

instruction. In multilingual countries like Tanzania, the choice of language of instruction is usually determined by the country's language policy (Adamson, 2020). Since most African countries were under colonial rule, many adopted the language of their former colonial masters. The influence of these foreign languages has deep roots in education, making it almost impossible to abandon them. Clinging to these foreign languages has more tangible reasons; English, for example, is no longer the language of a single country, and educating citizens in it makes graduates more globally accepted in the world employment market. Countries opt for these foreign languages to make their citizens more employable worldwide. Despite the good intentions of the idea, a forgotten fact is that the number of people who get employment and other opportunities abroad where these foreign languages are spoken is too small to require all learners to learn them. Research has also consistently shown that learning in an unfamiliar language negatively affects learning (Brock-Utne, 2007a; Kawonga & Maliva, 2018; Adamson, 2020). Within the African countries, the way foreign languages are used is striking. Many professions, such as engineering, law, and medicine, are taught in foreign languages, and the use of those languages ceases as graduates enter the workforce. The question is, 'why would they learn in a foreign language when they work and serve people who speak the same language that is mastered by both?' This scenario is better explained by linguistic imperialism, in which one language and culture dominate others (Phillipson, 2012).

Kiswahili is used as the language of instruction in Tanzania's primary schools, and English is taught as a subject (MoEVT, 2023). Less than 10% of all primary schools offer primary education in English, and the majority are privately owned (URT, 2020). The education and training policy states that both English and Kiswahili can be used as media of instruction in primary education (URT, 2023). This provision, which allows either language to be used as the language of instruction, confuses the public about the government's position on the language of instruction. The confusion intensifies when ordinary citizens see the political and educational elite educating their children in English-medium primary schools. This makes society believe that English is a better language and that children are educated when they can speak English well. This belief is held strongly by parents in many postcolonial countries. To parents, educating children in English-medium primary education prepares them to smoothly navigate secondary education and beyond. Parents in urban areas where English-medium primary schools are available feel inferior for their inability to educate their children in Kiswahili-medium schools, believing that good education is offered in English-medium schools.

Secondary and post-secondary education programmes, such as diplomas and degrees, are offered in English. Despite English being used in secondary and higher education, its use among people in Tanzania is limited to communicating with foreigners who do not speak Kiswahili. Limited English proficiency could explain why mastery of English is low among many people. The situation is worse for those who could not make it through secondary education and beyond. There has been an outcry over the low mastery of English among Tanzanian primary school pupils (Qorro, 2012) and secondary school students (Emmanuel, 2020; URT, 1984; Vuzo, 2007, 2010). Similarly, university students have been found to have English proficiency below the required level for many years (Qorro, 1999; Komba, 2012). Given the low English proficiency among graduates at various levels of education, there have been practices that use Kiswahili in teaching and learning English (Abdala, 2025). Whether this practice is successful remains a subject of discussion. In a more advanced evolution, teachers in Tanzania have resorted to translanguaging pedagogy as a coping strategy to enhance English language learning among secondary school students (Masala, 2021; Abdala, 2024; Fussy & Iddy, 2024). All these efforts have emerged as a way to facilitate learning both the English language and the content taught through it. Given that learning English in secondary education becomes this difficult, it is expected that matters are worse in vocational education centres where primary school graduates are enrolled.

5.2 Reasons for Choice of Language of Instruction

The choice of language of instruction in the education system is an important policy decision that impacts learners' academic experiences and long-term educational outcomes. Mastery of the content may be affected due to the language used. It will be difficult to master content when students learn in a language, they are not familiar with. Research has demonstrated that cognitive development and understanding are enhanced when students use their native language (Brock-Utne, 2010; Vuzo, 2012; Pinxteren, 2022). Cultural norms and values are also believed to be integrated when students' native languages are used in instruction. It has also been consistently found that students achieve better literacy and comprehension when they are taught in their native languages (Vuzo, 2012; Brock-Utne, 2010). It is further argued that materials and teachers can be easily found in the language most commonly used in the community where education is provided. In linguistically diverse contexts such as Tanzania, pedagogical, cognitive, sociocultural and policy factors govern the choice of language of instruction. The following subsections explain the factors that determine the language used in education.

5.3. Comprehension and Cognitive Development

Everything else being equal, choosing a language of instruction is based on its impact on learners' understanding and cognitive development. Research has consistently shown that students learn better when taught in the language they speak and understand (Hameso, 2001; Brock-Utne, 2007b; Qorro, 2013; Ellis, 2016). When this is the case, learners can understand complex and abstract ideas and concepts, think critically and engage meaningfully in classroom activities. A familiar language improves foundational literacy and reduces the cognitive load of learning content and new language concurrently (Maliva, 2024; Nakamura et al., 2023). Besides, learning in a familiar language supports deeper cognitive processing and can enhance students' academic performance.

5.4. Educational Equity and Access

The choice of language of instruction can either broaden or restrict access to quality education. Over the years, education has been provided primarily to the political elite and people in urban areas (Qorro, 2013). Learners from rural or linguistically marginalised backgrounds are more likely to participate and succeed academically if their first languages are used in education provision. On the contrary, providing education in a language unfamiliar to students may result in educational disparities across the country, disadvantaging those from underprivileged families and societies (Kisumbe et al., 2025). Unfamiliar language in education may lead to increased dropout rates and educational inequality. In multilingual societies, the choice of language of instruction is not solely a pedagogical but a social justice tool for development.

5.5. Sociocultural Identity and Inclusion

Language is strongly linked to cultural identity and self-esteem. The language of instruction learners prefer makes them feel honoured and reflects their cultural backgrounds. A familiar language of instruction also fosters a sense of belonging among students. This sociocultural dimension of language choice has been highlighted across contexts where the prestige and societal valuation of languages influence educational decisions. In many African settings, social prestige attached to former colonial languages such as English or French has shaped language policy and learners' aspirations, even when this choice does not align with optimal educational outcomes for all students (Hameso, 2001; Brock-Utne, 2007a; Vuzo, 2010). The choice of English for vocational education in Tanzania violates the sociocultural identity and excludes some learners from the training.

5.6 Transition to Higher Education and Global Competence

Policymakers usually adopt a foreign language of instruction and justify their decision by citing the need to prepare students for participation in higher education and the global labour market. Internationally dominant languages such as English, French, Portuguese and Spanish may be favoured on these grounds. African societies are also proud that their educated citizens speak those foreign languages proficiently. Proponents of this idea argue that proficiency in internationally dominant languages facilitates access to scientific knowledge, technology, and competitive employment opportunities (Babaci-Wilhite, 2013). This rationale can explain why many countries maintain English or other widely used languages as primary instructional languages in secondary and tertiary education, aiming to enhance students' competitiveness beyond local contexts (Hameso, 2001; Brock-Utne, 2007a; Nakamura et al., 2023). However, vocational training colleges train artisans who work with local communities that neither speak nor need the language.

Although it may be appropriate for general education to use a foreign language, vocational education and training should be allowed to use a familiar language. In vocational education and training centres, aligning education with international standards or global competitiveness is not a concern. For vocational education and training college students, a local language would meet their needs, given their level of formal education. Their low proficiency in foreign languages, which hindered their progression to higher education, should not resurface in vocational education centres. It is therefore irrelevant to use a foreign language in vocational education and training if we want students to complete their studies successfully.

5.7 Vocational Education and Language of Instruction

Worldwide, vocational education plays a role in creating manpower for internal use, such as in building construction and maintenance. That means the language of instruction in vocational education is the students' native or national language, since they do not aim to work outside their countries of origin. In Tanzania, where the national language is Kiswahili, a language mastered by more than 95 per cent of the population, it was ideal to use as the language of instruction in vocational education. Surprisingly, a foreign language is used. This practice led the researcher to try to answer the question: "What makes Tanzania use a foreign language in vocational education?" To answer this question, the linguistic imperialism theory was used to explain the dominance of foreign languages in education in postcolonial Africa, focusing specifically on English in Tanzania.

Following the launch of the Arusha Declaration in 1967, Tanzania adopted an education-for-all programme. Every education level was required to be independent and terminal; that is, primary education was to be complete and not a preparation for secondary education (URT, 1967). To prepare the nation's labour force, many vocational education centres were established to train youths in areas considered important to the nation. Folk Development Colleges (FDCs) were opened in many parts of the country. In these colleges, there were both short courses lasting a week or several months and long-term programmes spanning a year to three years. Farmers in the neighbouring villages would be trained on the better farming methods for a week or so.

VETA is a responsible organisation to oversee vocational education centres. The authority develops the curriculum, monitors its implementation, and decides which language to use as the language of instruction in these colleges. The authority is offering thirteen trades, namely: mechanical, electrical, civil and building engineering, automotive, commercial and business support, clothing and textile, transport, extractive industry, printing, cosmetology, agriculture and food processing, hospitality, tourism and travel agency, and fine and performing arts (VETA, n.d). These are available at various centres across the country. These trades are not found in every centre. Each centre specialises in three, four or five of these trades. There have been changes in the language of instruction in vocational education centres, where Kiswahili and English have been alternating. As of now, English is used as the medium of instruction.

Several challenges and barriers exist in implementing foreign language instruction in vocational training colleges. Language proficiency of both students and instructors is a significant factor in many parts of the world (Wilson & Komba, 2012; Andersen, 2024). Many students enter vocational training with limited proficiency in the foreign language, which hinders their ability to understand and engage with the course materials. Episodes of codeswitching, codemixing and translanguaging are evidence of low English proficiency in educational institutions (Masala, 2021; Fussy & Iddy, 2024; Abdulatief & McKinney, 2025). Low proficiency in a foreign language lead to difficulty in understanding technical concepts and procedures, resulting in gaps in knowledge and skills acquisition (Vuzo, 2010). Students need both theoretical knowledge and hands-on practical activities. To execute practical tasks, students need to master the language used to give instructions. In a foreign-language context, they need additional cognitive energy to translate or interpret materials taught in that language. Energy spent on translation and interpretation redirects attention from skills acquisition to attempts to

master the language. Moreover, language proficiency is not only a problem for students; instructors also lack the necessary language skills to effectively teach complex technical content in a foreign language (Qorro, 2012). Andersen (2024) reports on the frustrations vocational educators face in Norway due to a language barrier, as they become interpreters without formal training in language education issues in vocational education.

Cultural and contextual factors also pose barriers to skills acquisition in vocational training centres. Students from diverse linguistic backgrounds may experience varying degrees of difficulty, influenced by their prior exposure to the foreign language and the similarity between their native language and the language of instruction (Li & Pilz, 2023; Abdulatief & McKinney, 2025). Foreign languages may lack some culturally relevant terminology and expressions (Fussy & Iddy, 2024), a factor that can alienate students and diminish the contextual relevance of their training. Again, if students fail to understand instructions due to a language barrier, their participation in practical tasks becomes less effective, resulting in incomplete or incorrect execution of procedures. In vocational training centres, some machines require a precise understanding of their functions to operate; faulty operation due to an inability to comprehend the language may pose safety risks to students. Any operational inaccuracy may result in poor performance or fatal accidents. The use of English in vocational education centres reflects what Beiler (2022) terms as Anglonormativity in education. Beiler reiterates that the overemphasis on English usage in education has adversely affected educational provision in many countries. Anglonormativity has deeper roots in former British African colonies despite low proficiency among the majority of citizens. In that view, Abdulatief and McKinney (2025) suggest that training that may be better delivered in a native or familiar language should not be offered in English.

Institutional challenges, such as a lack of resources and support for language learning, further intensify the problem (Amani, 2021). The lack of accessible materials tailored to learners' language level widens knowledge gaps, particularly in understanding technical terminology and the procedures involved in learning a skill. The majority of teaching and learning materials, including books, are not locally prepared; they were prepared at the level of native English speakers. Their use in foreign language contexts makes it difficult for vocational education students to comprehend. The use of a foreign language in vocational education training centres can promote unnecessary inequalities. Variations in foreign language proficiency among students will ultimately lead to variations in skill acquisition, providing an advantageous position to those with a stronger

background over those with a weaker one. Some students will struggle more to acquire skills because of the language barrier. Although practical skills require hands-on practice that is demonstrated visually, the theoretical understanding of concepts requires mastery of the language used in instruction to comprehend manuals and books students read. Since students learn a foreign language, an intensive language-learning programme is needed to enable them to understand content delivered in that language.

Most of those who join vocational education and training institutions come from secondary education and could not make it to high school due to, among other factors, poor performance at that level. Since English is the language of instruction, failure in secondary schools is attributed to many factors, including lower English proficiency among students. While those who join vocational training centres from secondary schools find it hard to learn their trades in English, those who join vocational education from primary schools where Kiswahili is a medium of instruction find it more difficult to survive in English-medium vocational education. Given this situation, using English as the medium of instruction in vocational training exposes students to the same language paradox they have been unable to cope with in mainstream education. Maro (2023) found that skill acquisition was ineffective when English was used as the language of instruction in vocational education. Furthermore, using a foreign language in vocational education makes students spend more time learning the language than mastering the trade. While it may be assumed that these decisions are made with little information about the impact of foreign languages in education, Bernstein (1961) argues that vocational training colleges are aware of the importance of students' social background but continue to offer training in the languages that students are not conversant with. Using a foreign language diminishes students' chances of mastering the skills they need in vocational education centres. This may finally make them exit vocational training without achieving what they previously set out to achieve.

6. Conclusion and Way Forward

Given the position of English in the world today, it may be futile to attempt any check against it. Many nations learn English due to commerce, transportation, and globalisation. Moreover, English is used by powerful nations worldwide, such as the USA and the UK, and, as such, is seen as a language of power (Lasern-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Therefore, many nations want to associate themselves with these powerful nations through the language. In China, for example, more candidates each year sit for English proficiency tests to gain admission to English-speaking countries. They do so to acquire the science

and technology found in these English-speaking nations to develop their own country. It is, therefore, not surprising to see countries such as Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony, joining the Commonwealth in their attempt to gain the advantages of the English-speaking giants of the world. Rwanda has also switched from French to English as its official language. Although there may be other reasons for such a shift, the power of English may have played a role.

Despite its importance in world affairs, English in vocational training colleges in Tanzania acts as a hindrance to knowledge and skills acquisition. It slows the rate at which youth acquire skills. Again, these skills may not be fully acquired when delivered in a foreign language that neither the students nor the teachers have sufficient mastery of. This results in half-prepared artisans. More importantly, vocational training graduates do not need English to learn their trade. The people VET graduates serve neither need English nor do they speak it. This makes English in vocational education an unnecessary burden on students, as it contributes nothing to the trade they learn. Therefore, English as the medium of instruction in vocational education centres acts as a hindrance to achieving the objectives of vocational education among the youth. Strict use of English in these colleges does more harm to these students. It is recommended that a bilingual language-of-instruction approach be implemented, using both English and Kiswahili. The bilingual approach will have two advantages. First, students will acquire the skills with average effort because the language used is familiar to them. Second, the students will have an opportunity to learn English in a low-anxiety context, as noted by Krashen (1985), since language will not be used as a condition for determining skill acquisition.

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