



A Comparative Analysis of Language-Based and Non-Language-Based Instructors in Tanzanian Universities: Exploring Perceptions Towards a Shift to Kiswahili as a Medium of Instruction

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Abstract

This study examines Tanzanian university instructors' views on the shift from English to Kiswahili as the medium of instruction (MoI), comparing language-based and non-language-based instructors. Drawing on Language Planning and Policy Theory and Sociolinguistic Theory, the research examines how social, structural, and personal attitudes shape instructors' views on language use in higher education. Through a survey of 74 university instructors, we investigated their opinions on the feasibility, benefits, and challenges of adopting Kiswahili as a MoI. The results show that language-based instructors (LBIs) are generally supportive, highlighting how Kiswahili can improve understanding, boost student engagement, and promote cultural identity. In contrast, non-language-based instructors (NLBIs), particularly in technical and scientific fields, expressed cautious support, raising concerns about resources, specialised vocabulary, and alignment with international standards. The study suggests that successfully introducing Kiswahili requires practical steps, such as developing teaching materials, training instructors, and aligning with national education policies. These findings reveal the diverse perspectives across disciplines and the complex realities of implementing language policy in higher education. By understanding these challenges and opportunities, policymakers, university administrators, and educators can make more informed decisions to support effective and culturally relevant language practices in Tanzanian universities.

Introduction

The language of instruction (LoI) plays a crucial role in education, influencing knowledge acquisition and intellectual growth. The effectiveness of learning is closely tied to the language in which instruction is delivered, making LoI a significant policy decision that impacts inclusivity and overall educational quality (Wan, 2021). Beyond serving as a medium for knowledge transfer, language functions as a vehicle for cultural expression and identity formation in education.

In Tanzania, the discourse surrounding the appropriate LoI has persisted for decades. Supporters of Kiswahili, the national language, argue that it enhances learning and fosters meaningful participation



among students, especially those from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds (Hiza & Paschal, 2024; Nzingula, 2005). They suggest that education in Kiswahili preserves cultural identity and provides equitable learning opportunities for all.

Conversely, advocates for English emphasise its global significance as the language of higher education, technology, and international communication. They assert that maintaining English in secondary and tertiary education equips students for global opportunities and access to international knowledge (Marwa, 2014; Adamson, 2014; Biseko, 2024).

This ongoing tension between promoting accessible education through Kiswahili and preparing students for a globalised future in English fuels debates over the language of instruction in Tanzania (The Citizen, 2022; IPS News, 1998). Prior research indicates that the use of English in higher education often disadvantages students proficient in Kiswahili, leading to limited classroom participation and comprehension (Qorro, 2006, 2009). This notion of "language shock" refers to the difficulties students face when switching from Kiswahili to English, which affect their academic performance (Qorro, 2006).

The Tanzanian government's recent proposal to adopt Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in universities signals a potentially transformative shift in language policy (Hiza & Paschal, 2023). However, disparities between policy intentions and actual implementation remain prevalent (Li & Mao, 2024).

This study compares the perceptions of two groups of university instructors in Tanzania: language-based instructors, including Kiswahili specialists, and non-language-based instructors from fields such as science and engineering. By employing a structured survey, the study examines perceptions toward a shift to Kiswahili, exploring perceived benefits, anticipated challenges, and the adequacy of learning resources.

Literature Review

Language plays a central role in shaping how students think, learn, and participate in education. A substantial body of research shows that when instruction is delivered in a language students are not proficient in, learning and engagement tend to suffer (Baldauf & Hamid, 2009; Cummins, 2000). In Tanzania, this raises concerns about the sustainability of teaching students in a language they understand insufficiently (Li & Mao, 2024). Teaching in a familiar language has been shown to augment understanding and foster critical thinking.

Kiswahili is the medium of instruction in primary education, whereas English predominates in secondary and higher education (Mohr & Barasa, 2024). Challenges in the shift from Kiswahili to English as the medium of instruction in Tanzanian post-primary school education levels are well documented (Qorro, 2006, 2009; Brock-Utne, 2007; Rubagumya, 2010). However, much of this research comes from language-based scholars, whose perspectives naturally focus on linguistic issues, leaving the voices of non-language-based scholars, including instructors, largely unheard. Therefore, comparing language-based instructors (LBIs) and non-language-based instructors (NLBIs) helps to fill this gap, offering a more balanced understanding of how language policy plays out across the curriculum.

Makulilo and Madeni (2022) suggest that English's dominance is rooted in historical precedents rather than pedagogical superiority. Hiza and Paschal (2023) argue that consistent use of Kiswahili throughout the education system could enhance comprehension and academic performance. They



also note that successful implementation requires careful planning and resource development, emphasising the need for empirical research on instructors' perceptions.

Evidence from multilingual countries illustrates that instruction in local languages can improve access to education (Bamgbose, 2000; Brock-Utne, 2007). Research shows that learners achieve better comprehension and engage more in classrooms when instruction is delivered in a language they understand, as this reduces the cognitive load of learning content in an unfamiliar language (UNESCO, 2016). In Tanzania, studies indicate that students face difficulties when transitioning from Kiswahili in primary education to English in secondary and higher education, with teachers often resorting to code-switching to Kiswahili to support understanding (Upor and Mihayo, 2021; Kisumbe and Mashala, 2025; Kinyaduka and Kiwara, 2008). Hence, examining both language-based and non-language-based instructors' perspectives can offer a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of how language policy influences teaching and learning practices.

Despite a growing body of literature on language-in-education policies, notable gaps remain. Much existing research focuses on students' experiences or on primary and secondary education (Roemer, 2023; Kisumbe & Mashala, 2020; Abdallah, 2024), leaving higher education comparatively underexamined. Although Hiza and Paschal (2023) articulate strong arguments for the use of Kiswahili in universities, they do not empirically investigate instructors' perceptions. Consequently, there is limited evidence regarding the feasibility, anticipated benefits, and potential challenges of adopting Kiswahili at the university level, particularly amid ongoing uncertainty in post-secondary language policy. This study seeks to examine university instructors' perspectives and compare views between language-based and non-language-based instructors to inform more context-sensitive language policy decisions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Language Planning and Policy Theory and Sociolinguistic Theory, which together provide a comprehensive lens for examining the adoption of Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in Tanzanian universities. The integration of these theories enables the study to capture both macro-level policy and implementation dynamics and micro-level attitudinal and identity-related factors that influence acceptance. Together, these theories allow the study to examine both the structural feasibility and social legitimacy of adopting Kiswahili as a medium of instruction. Language Planning and Policy Theory addresses questions of policy readiness, resources, and institutional capacity, while Sociolinguistic Theory focuses on attitudes, disciplinary identities, and perceptions. Their complementarity justifies the study's focus on instructors' views and guides the interpretation of survey findings by linking practical preparedness with human factors. By integrating these theories, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how language-of-instruction reforms may be perceived, experienced, and implemented in Tanzanian universities.

Language Planning and Policy Theory

Jürgen Habermas is considered the foundational thinker behind language-based planning theory, as articulated in his Theory of Communicative Action (1984, 1987). In planning practice, his ideas were later developed and applied by planners such as John Forester, Patsy Healey, and Judith Innes.

Language Planning and Policy Theory focuses on how language decisions are formulated, implemented, and sustained within educational systems (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). It emphasises that language choices are never neutral but are shaped by historical, political, institutional, and resource-related factors. From this perspective, introducing Kiswahili into higher education is not simply a matter of preference; it requires deliberate planning, including curriculum revision, development of



academic terminology, lecturer training, and the provision of appropriate teaching materials. This theory thus helps explain the structural and policy-related challenges that impede attempts to change the language of instruction in Tanzania.

Sociolinguistic Theory

Sociolinguistic Theory examines how attitudes, beliefs, social identities, and professional affiliations shape language use and policy acceptance (Fishman, 1991). Policies may exist formally, but their success depends on the willingness of those implementing them to accept and engage with them. Applied to this study, Sociolinguistic Theory helps explain how instructors' disciplinary backgrounds may influence their perceptions of Kiswahili. This perspective highlights the importance of social acceptance alongside institutional readiness.

Methodology

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to target university instructors in Tanzania, who were stratified as language-based or non-language-based. Data collection involved a structured questionnaire distributed via *Google Forms* that included demographic information and Likert-scale responses assessing attitudes, perceived benefits, perceived challenges, and the feasibility of adopting Kiswahili as a medium of instruction.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics via SPSS version 26. Ethical considerations were strictly followed to ensure confidentiality and voluntary participation.

The study involved 74 university instructors, representing a range of disciplines and levels of professional experience. In terms of disciplinary background, 24 instructors (32%) were language-based, specialising in subjects such as Kiswahili and English. In comparison, the remaining 50 instructors (68%) were non-language-based, drawn from science, engineering, and technical fields. This diversity enabled meaningful comparisons of perspectives across academic domains.

Regarding academic rank, 33 instructors (45%) held the position of lecturer, 26 (35%) were senior lecturers, and 15 (20%) were assistant lecturers or tutorial fellows. This distribution reflects balanced representation across professional hierarchies, providing insights from individuals with diverse teaching responsibilities and levels of expertise.

With respect to teaching experience, 30 instructors (41%) had 1–5 years of experience, 26 (35%) had 6–10 years, and 18 (24%) had more than 10 years of experience in higher education. This range demonstrates that both early-career and more experienced instructors contributed to the study, providing a comprehensive view of the academic environment in which Kiswahili might be implemented.

Overall, the sample's demographic composition is heterogeneous, providing a robust empirical foundation for examining how professional background and disciplinary affiliation influence perceptions of Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in higher education.

Findings

This section presents the study's results on university instructors' perceptions of using Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in Tanzanian higher education. Instructors generally hold positive attitudes toward adopting Kiswahili as a medium of instruction, with language-based instructors showing stronger support due to their familiarity with the language. They highlighted benefits such as improved comprehension, greater classroom engagement, enhanced critical thinking, and reinforcement of cultural identity. Non-language-based instructors were more cautious, citing



challenges related to technical terminology, resource availability, and alignment with international standards. Overall, instructors considered implementation feasible but emphasised that successful adoption would require targeted institutional support, curriculum development, and professional training to address practical constraints and ensure effective use of Kiswahili across disciplines.

The findings are organised into key areas to provide a clear and comprehensive view: attitudes toward Kiswahili as a medium of instruction, perceived benefits and challenges, and overall feasibility of implementation.

Attitudes Toward Kiswahili as a Medium of Instruction

The survey explored instructors’ attitudes toward adopting Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in higher education. Among the 74 (100%) instructors surveyed, 45 (61%) expressed positive attitudes, recognising that Kiswahili could enhance students’ comprehension, promote inclusivity, and strengthen a shared national identity. The total of 19 instructors (26%) reported a neutral stance, reflecting cautious optimism: they acknowledged the potential benefits but remained uncertain about practical implementation, particularly in specialised or resource-intensive programmes. The remaining 10 instructors (13%) held negative views, citing concerns about Kiswahili’s limitations in expressing technical or scientific terminology and the perception that English offers greater global competitiveness.

Perceptions varied significantly by disciplinary background. Among the 24 language-based instructors, 20 (83%) were positive, 3 (12%) were neutral, and 1 (5%) was negative. In contrast, among the 50 non-language-based instructors, 25 (50%) expressed positive attitudes, 16 (32%) were neutral, and 9 (18%) were negative. This difference highlights that language-based instructors, familiar with Kiswahili, feel more confident about its use, whereas non-language-based instructors approach it with greater caution. Table 1 summarises instructors’ attitudes by disciplinary background.

Table 1: Instructors’ Attitudes Toward Kiswahili as a Medium of Instruction

Attitude toward Kiswahili	Language-Based Instructors (n=24)	Non-Language-Based Instructors (n=50)	Total (n=74)	Percentage (%)
Positive	20	25	45	61
Neutral	3	16	19	26
Negative	1	9	10	13
Total	24	50	74	100

Field Data (2025)

The table highlights that instructors from language-based disciplines strongly endorse Kiswahili as a medium of instruction, emphasising its potential to improve comprehension, critical thinking, and classroom engagement. Non-language-based instructors also show support, but their responses reflect caution, mainly due to concerns about technical terminology, resource availability, and alignment with international academic standards. Overall, these findings suggest that while Kiswahili is widely recognised for its pedagogical and sociocultural value, successful adoption will require targeted strategies.

Perceived Benefits of Kiswahili as a Medium of Instruction

Instructors were asked to identify the benefits they believe would result from adopting Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in Tanzanian universities. Most instructors recognised meaningful advantages: 23 (31%) felt that using Kiswahili would help students understand course content more easily, 20 (27%) believed it would make classrooms more engaging, 16 (22%) thought it could



strengthen students’ critical thinking skills, and 15 (20%) pointed to its role in promoting cultural identity.

These views differed slightly depending on the instructor’s disciplinary backgrounds. Among the 24 language-based instructors, 7 (29%) reported improved comprehension, while 6 (25%) reported increased engagement. Another 5 (21%) pointed to enhanced critical thinking, and 6 (25%) recognised the value of reinforcing cultural identity through the use of Kiswahili.

The responses from the 50 non-language-based instructors showed a similar trend, though with slightly different emphases. The total of 16 (32%) instructors believed Kiswahili would improve comprehension, 14 (28%) expected greater classroom engagement, 11 (22%) anticipated stronger critical thinking skills, and 9 (18%) felt it would enhance cultural identity. These findings suggest that introducing Kiswahili as a medium of instruction could support both learning and cultural connection. Table 2 summarises the normalised results.

Table 2: Instructors’ Perceived Benefits of Kiswahili as Medium of Instruction

Perceived Benefit	Language-Based Instructors (n=24)	Non-Language-Based Instructors (n=50)	Total (n=74)	Percentage (%)
Improved student comprehension	7	16	23	31
Increased classroom engagement	6	14	20	27
Enhanced critical thinking skills	5	11	16	22
Strengthened cultural identity	6	9	15	20
Total respondents	24	50	74	100

Field Data (2025)

The findings suggest that instructors widely recognise the pedagogical and cultural benefits of using Kiswahili as a medium of instruction. Language-based instructors, who are more familiar with the language, express strong confidence in its ability to improve comprehension, encourage classroom participation, enhance critical thinking, and reinforce cultural identity. Non-language-based instructors also see these benefits but are slightly more cautious, reflecting concerns about practical implementation in technical or specialised courses.

Overall, these results indicate that adopting Kiswahili has significant potential to enhance learning outcomes and cultural relevance across all disciplines.

Perceived Challenges of Using Kiswahili as a Medium of Instruction

Although instructors recognise the pedagogical and sociocultural benefits of Kiswahili, they also identified several challenges that could impede its effective adoption. To clarify the relative importance of each challenge, instructors were asked to identify their primary concern, ensuring that responses were mutually exclusive. Among the 74 instructors surveyed, 20 (27%) indicated limited availability of academic resources as their primary concern, 18 (24%) cited the lack of technical or disciplinary terminology, 15 (20%) highlighted alignment with international academic standards, 12 (16%) noted the need for lecturer training, and 9 (12%) reported no major challenge or other minor issues.

Disciplinary differences were evident. Among the 24 language-based instructors, challenges were reported less frequently: only 5 (21%) highlighted limited resources, 3 (12%) noted a lack of technical terminology, and 2 (8%) mentioned alignment with international standards. In contrast, the 50 non-language-based instructors reported greater concern: 15 (30%) cited limited resources, 15 (30%)



identified a lack of technical terminology, and 13 (26%) emphasised alignment with international standards. Language-based instructors generally expressed greater confidence in their ability to teach in Kiswahili, reflecting familiarity with the language. In contrast, non-language-based instructors were more cautious, particularly in disciplines requiring specialised technical knowledge. Table 3 summarises these findings by disciplinary background.

Table 3: Instructors' Primary Perceived Challenges of Using Kiswahili

Primary Challenge	Language-Based Instructors (n=24)	Non-Language-Based Instructors (n=50)	Total (n=74)	Percentage (%)
Limited availability of academic resources	5	15	20	27
Lack of technical/ disciplinary terminology	3	15	18	24
Alignment with international academic standards	2	13	15	20
Need for lecturer training	6	6	12	16
No major challenge / Other	8	1	9	12
Total respondents	24	50	74	100

Field Data (2025)

The findings indicate that practical and structural challenges remain a key concern for instructors, especially in non-language-based disciplines. Concerns about technical terminology, resource availability, and alignment with international academic standards highlight the need for targeted institutional support, curriculum development, and professional training.

Overall Feasibility and Readiness for Implementation

Instructors were asked to assess the overall feasibility of adopting Kiswahili as a medium of instruction and the readiness of universities to support such a change. Among the 74 instructors surveyed, 39 (53%) considered implementation feasible, 22 (30%) were uncertain, and 13 (17%) felt it was not viable.

Within these categories, disciplinary background influenced perceptions. Among those who found it feasible, 19 were language-based instructors (49%) and 20 were non-language-based instructors (51%). Of those uncertain, four were language-based (18%) and 18 were non-language-based (82%). Among instructors who perceived Kiswahili as not feasible, one was language-based (8%), and 12 were non-language-based (92%). This distribution indicates that language-based instructors are generally more confident, whereas non-language-based instructors are more cautious. Table 4 summarises instructors' perceptions of feasibility and readiness.

Table 4: Instructors' Perceptions of Feasibility and Readiness

Perception of Feasibility	Language-Based Instructors	Non-Language-Based Instructors	Total (n=74)	Percentage (%)
Feasible	19	20	39	53
Uncertain	4	18	22	30
Not Feasible	1	12	13	17
Total	24	50	74	100

Field Data (2025)

The table shows that although a majority of instructors view the implementation of Kiswahili as feasible, perceptions vary notably by disciplinary background. Language-based instructors are



generally confident in their ability to teach in Kiswahili. In contrast, non-language-based instructors are more cautious, reflecting concerns about technical terminology, resource availability, and the need for training.

These findings suggest that successful adoption of Kiswahili will require targeted institutional support, including adjustments to the curriculum, the development of technical terminology, the provision of resources, and the training of lecturers. Addressing these factors will be critical to ensuring that both instructors and students can fully benefit from a Kiswahili-medium instructional environment.

Discussion

The findings reveal a complex but promising picture of instructors' perceptions regarding Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in Tanzanian universities. Overall, instructors recognise its value, though enthusiasm varies by disciplinary background. Language-based instructors (LBIs), specialising in Kiswahili and linguistics, are overwhelmingly positive, emphasising pedagogical benefits, cultural identity reinforcement, and professional satisfaction. These observations align with Hiza and Paschal (2023), who highlight that instruction in a familiar language enhances comprehension, engagement, and critical thinking. Similarly, Bamgbose (2000) and Brock-Utne (2007) emphasise that the use of local languages in higher education strengthens students' cultural identity and supports meaningful learning experiences.

Non-language-based instructors (NLBIs) adopt a more cautious stance. While many acknowledge Kiswahili's potential, they express concerns about limited academic resources, insufficient technical and scientific terminology, and alignment with international standards. These concerns mirror findings from Tanzania and other multilingual contexts, where technical disciplines present unique challenges for national or local languages (Makulilo & Madeni, 2022; Mosha, 2015). Advocates of English argue that Kiswahili lacks sufficient technical vocabulary to convey complex academic and scientific concepts. In contrast, proponents counter that linguistic borrowing and evolution enable languages to expand naturally to meet new educational and professional needs (Shumbusho, 2020).

Applying Language Planning and Policy Theory, these findings underscore the importance of structural readiness. Concerns about curriculum adaptation, terminology development, and resource availability reflect the institutional and policy challenges that must be addressed for successful implementation (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). Corpus planning (terminology) and acquisition planning (resources) emerge as essential steps, particularly in technical disciplines. Meanwhile, Sociolinguistic Theory explains attitudinal variance: professional identity, disciplinary orientation, and social perceptions shape acceptance or resistance (Fishman, 1991). LBIs, whose work closely aligns with Kiswahili, show strong support, whereas NLBIs weigh benefits against practical and professional constraints.

Together, these frameworks highlight that structural preparedness alone is insufficient without social acceptance, and positive attitudes cannot overcome practical barriers. This dual perspective explains why LBIs are highly enthusiastic while NLBIs are more cautious. Global research supports these findings: experiences from Africa and Asia indicate that national or local languages enhance comprehension, engagement, and cultural identity when supported by preparation, curriculum adaptation, and resources (Brock-Utne, 2007; Bamgbose, 2000). In Tanzania, disciplinary sensitivity is critical; effective strategies in the humanities and social sciences may not transfer directly to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields without targeted support.



The study further illustrates the link between pedagogy and identity. For LBIs, Kiswahili serves as a medium for nurturing cultural awareness, building confidence, and reinforcing professional identity. This aligns with Cummins (2000), who argues that instruction in a familiar language enhances cognitive development and learner confidence.

Recommendations

This study presents two key recommendations to strengthen the use of Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in Tanzanian higher education.

First, universities should create regular forums for dialogue can encourage peer learning, shared ownership of language policy, and continuous feedback, helping to make the adoption of Kiswahili both practical and sustainable. Aligning these university-level efforts with national education and language policies will ensure coherence between policy goals and classroom practice.

Second, the government should provide sustained policy support and strategic guidance. This includes investing in the development of Kiswahili academic materials, aligning higher-education language policies with broader national goals, and supporting initiatives to build institutional and instructor capacity. Clear policy direction, funding, and oversight can create an enabling environment that complements university efforts and ensures the long-term success of Kiswahili as a medium of instruction.

Together, these recommendations aim to create a supportive and coherent ecosystem in which Kiswahili is not only recognised as a legitimate medium of instruction but is actively and effectively integrated into teaching and learning across Tanzanian higher education.

Conclusion

The study shows that Tanzanian university instructors generally value Kiswahili as a medium of instruction, though their enthusiasm varies by discipline. The adoption of Kiswahili holds the potential to enhance student outcomes and cultural relevance, provided practical challenges are addressed through strategic and supportive measures.

A robust national language policy that guides the gradual incorporation of Kiswahili is crucial for promoting local empowerment and cultural identity. Future research should also more closely examine students' experiences better to understand the impact of Kiswahili in higher education.

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