Language Course Report 29/08/2015

Description:
With financial support from the A.J. Pressland Memorial Fund I completed an intensive Kiswahili course at the Iringa Swahili School, Tanzania, from 6th July to 28th September. During this time I took one-on-one or small group lessons from 8.30am to 1.30pm every weekday. The majority of these classes were undertaken in the classrooms located at Rivervalley Campsite. I also took part in three ‘cultural excursions’ to an orphanage and craft workshop, The Chief Mkawawa Museum in Kalenga, and to the second hand clothes and shoes market in town.

Language Progression:
When I began the course I had only a rudimentary understanding of Kiswahili greetings and grammar. During the two months I completed the basic course and moved into the advanced class. I am now able to read, write, speak, and understand Kiswahili to a working proficiency. I feel comfortable conversing on a variety of topics across multiple tenses and using a variety of grammatical forms. Although far from complete, my vocabulary is greatly expanded and I am now generally able to make myself understood. I have purchased the advanced Kiswahili textbook so I can continue my studies now that the course has finished.

Contributions to research:
This course has been invaluable to my PhD fieldwork. My Kiswahili teachers were able to teach me vocabulary and concepts pertinent to my research, as well as provide me with locally specific knowledge. In the penultimate week of the course my teacher accompanied me to meet with the chairman of villages and helped me to set up various meetings with farmers in the surrounding villages. She then accompanied me to these meetings, giving me the confidence to speak to groups of people in Kiswahili. She also helped with translation when needed. I now feel able to conduct my questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups in Kiswahili with the support of my research assistant for translation where needed.

I have very much enjoyed learning Kiswahili and will continue to expand my vocabulary and grammatical knowledge.
Introduction:
In this report I will provide an overview of my two month Kiswahili course at the Iringa Swahili School, Tanzania; discuss how this course has contributed to my PhD fieldwork; and how being able to speak some Kiswahili has enhanced my experiences of living and working in Tanzania.
1. Starting Off

I have long known that if I decided to do a PhD Tanzania would be the location I would choose. I first went to Tanzania in 2008 with some school friends after our GCSEs for a ‘mini gap year’. I fell in love with the country - its environment, people, and also its language. Kiswahili was unlike any language I had ever heard before. The sentence structure seemed incomprehensible, and some of the sounds I just couldn’t seem to make. On this month long trip I managed to pick up some simple greetings and basic conversation, but it wetted my appetite for learning more. A few years later in 2011 I found myself back in Tanzania to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro for charity. I was able to use my rudimental Kiswahili to talk to the porters on the mountain, but I didn’t get much of a chance to learn anything new. When I was planning my PhD fieldwork during my MPhil year 2013-2014 I was certain that I would also take the opportunity to immerse myself in the language. This would not only enable me to test myself as language learning has never come naturally to me, but it would enable me to engage more easily with the farmers I would be working with, and provide a transferrable skill for my future career prospects in East Africa. It is with this in mind that I enrolled for a 2 month course at the Iringa Swahili School in Tanzania, with much appreciated funding from the A.J. Pressland Award.
2. First Steps

In preparation for my trip to Tanzania, from Michaelmas to Easter of 2014-2015 I completed the Basic 1 and Basic 2 Kiswahili courses at CULP. These courses provided me with the groundwork for learning Kiswahili, but also reminded me why despite learning French and German at school, English is the only language I can speak with any working proficiency. Not without some degree of trepidation, and armed with a playlist of Kiswahili rap from my Tanzanian friend in Cambridge, I set off for Tanzania on 1st July. It didn’t take me long to be very grateful for my upcoming Kiswahili course! On my first day I attempted to buy a sim card from a stall and ended up being registered for the local internet café. This turned out to be very useful, but it wasn’t exactly what I was trying to ask for!

The Iringa Swahili School is based at Rivervalley Campsite, about a 25min drive from Iringa Town. It is in picturesque surroundings by the Little Ruaha River, with plenty of opportunities for running and hiking. The classrooms are small, round, wood and thatch buildings equipped with a white board. There are about 10 teachers who are all Tanzanian and live in the local area. On my first day of class I found out that I would be in a lesson by myself, taught by a lady called Fatuma. Fatuma is only a couple of years older than me and we became good friends. Classes ran from 8.30am to 1.30pm with two short breaks. The lessons were very varied, and I was encouraged to speak a lot from the start.
The lessons were a mix of grammar, practicing writing stores, and general conversation on a wide range of topics. Initially I found the grammar very challenging. Kiswahili has 18 noun classes, and many grammatical forms with do not exist in English. After a while though I managed to get the hang of it and it started to make sense. The lessons were loosely based on a textbook, which had been written by the teachers themselves, but the teachers were very good at tailoring the lessons for the individual needs of the students. For example, as I neared the end of the course the teachers helped me to translate my questionnaires into Kiswahili, and taught my vocabulary and concepts specific to agriculture. During my last couple of weeks at the Kiswahili School my teacher came with me into the nearby villages to run some focus groups with the farmers. This was a complete baptism of fire and initially very intimidating until I got used to it! For one focus group 24 farmers had turned out to talk to me, and I spent the next hour talking to them in Kiswahili with only a tiny bit of help from my Kiswahili teacher. As she was from the town she seemed even more out of place than I did in the villages!

We also had homework everyday, so it felt a bit like going back to school! During my two months at the language school I had four different teachers who all had their particularly skills. By the final two weeks I was moved into the advanced class with some American missionaries who were in their fourth month of learning. This provided a fantastic opportunity for me to learn from them and gain in confidence using more complex grammar.

As part of the language course I also learnt a lot about Tanzanian culture. Something that was particularly special was discussing the cultural differences between Tanzania and the UK. We had a Tanzanian cooking day where the teachers taught us how to cook traditional Tanzanian food like pilau rice, beans, masala tea, chapatti, an a range of stews. This also involved learning how to kill chickens the halal way. This brought home to me how disassociated we in the UK are with where our meat comes from and the work that goes in to preparing it. We also went on a trip to the Matumaini Centre in Iringa Town where women who are struggling to take care of their children, and aids orphans can go to live to learn crafts and access primary education. There was a trip to the Mkawa museum where we learned about the history of the Wahehe people, the main tribal grouping in Iringa Region. Finally, we spent a day in town going to the second hand clothes and shoes market to learn about what happens to all the clothes that are donated in other countries, and how they end up being sold in the auction in Iringa.

Aside from formal classes, staying at Rivervalley Campsite meant that I was immersed in Kiswahili every minute of the day. All the staff at the campsite lived in the surrounding villages, and although most of them spoke at least a small amount of English
‘I am able to learn many teeth’ – Kiswahili provides multiple opportunities for social embarrassment

Initially all I could manage was ‘hello’, but as the weeks went on we managed more complex conversations. In my experience, people in Tanzania are very welcoming, and really appreciate you having a go at speaking Kiwahili, even if it is not 100% correct!

Something I quickly learnt was that Kiswahili provides multiple opportunities for social embarrassment. If you pronounce certain words slightly wrongly it can have a completely different and unintended meanings. During one of my first conversations with a group of children collecting water I was struggling to make myself understood, so I tried to say ‘I need to learn more words’. By choosing the wrong noun class to conjugate I said ‘maneno’ instead of ‘meno’ and had told the children ‘I am able to learn many teeth’. They promptly ran away and I was left very confused until I realized my mistake. Other potential pitfalls include ‘kunywa’ meaning to drink and ‘kunya’ meaning to urinate; ‘jambo’ meaning affairs and ‘jamba’ meaning to pass wind; and ‘chupa’ meaning bottle and ‘chupi’ meaning underwear. Kiswahili really is a minefield of cultural inappropriateness!

3. Life after language course

At the end of August I graduated from the Iringa Kiswahili School and moved into Iringa Town to start my PhD fieldwork. Over the past month, and still ongoing, I am spending time out in the villages talking to farmers about the challenges they face in agriculture, and organizations that are trying to improve credit, input, and market access for farmers. This involves running focus groups with about 6-10 farmers, individual surveys and extended interviews, and farm visits. As I definitely am not yet fluent in Kiwahili I am working with a translator, but I am trying to do as much of it as I can myself in Kiswahili to build rapport and cut out a layer of translation. However, sometimes even when I speak correct Kiswahili people do not understand me due to my ‘foreign’ accent and the fact that mzungu (white people) do not usually speak Kiswahili!

Having a working proficiency in Kiswahili is also useful for practical reasons. In the market I can engage with people in Kiswahili, and showing that you have spent the time to learn the local language means that you often do not get charged to inflated ‘mzungu price’! I am also able to arrange my own fieldwork schedules by texting my village contacts in Kiswahili. I still struggle with conversations on the phone in Kiswahili, but I hope by the time I leave Tanzania in mid-December I will be able to hold a conversation without needing to brandish my phone at the nearest bilingual person to help me out.
Learning Kiswahili has also unearthed a passion for languages which I did not initially think I possessed from my experiences learning languages at school. As well as entrenching my commitment to continuing to improve my Kiswahili, I now am also learning some Kihehe, the language of the main tribal group in Iringa Region. Some of the farmers I spoke to in the villages only spoke Kihehe and so we had to have a three way translation from Kihehe to Kiswahili to English. I am planning to spend more time with these farmers so I can pick up some more Kihehe and talk to people in their first language.

I still hope to pursue a career in East Africa so having a working proficiency in Kiswahili is a very strong advantage.

Nashukuru A.J. Pressland Fund, ulinisaidia vizuri kujifunza Kiswahili katika Tanzania!

(Thank you very much A.J. Pressland Fund, you helped me very well to learn Kiwahili!)