

# The Use of Shona as Medium of Instruction in Zimbabwean Primary Schools: A Case Study of Buhera South District

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**Abstract**—The study examined the implementation of the 2006 Zimbabwean language policy which stipulates that Shona may be used as medium of instruction in primary schools up to grade 7, a development which came 26 years after Zimbabwe gained her independence. The paper investigated the extent to which Shona is being used in the teaching-learning process where English, a foreign language, has always mediated the teaching and examining of primary education in the country. The research design adopted for the study was mainly qualitative and data was collected through observation, interviews and questionnaires involving heads of schools, teachers and grade 7 pupils from 5 primary schools in Buhera South District. The study found out that the use of Shona in the teaching and learning of primary school pupils has not been widely accepted. Several reasons as to why a few teachers and pupils use Shona during teaching and learning and why a majority seemed to favour English have been found. One among others being that the language of the textbook and the examination has not changed from English. The study thus, concludes that although the use of Shona, an indigenous language, as medium of instruction came as a positive linguistic development in the country, there are still challenges at the implementation stage which need immediate attention. The study therefore recommends a revision of the language policy of the country so that it does not face tissue rejection and this should be done in wide consultation with teachers.

**Index Terms**—Shona, medium of instruction, indigenous language, primary schools

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language policies in Africa were introduced by the European powers that colonized the continent. Each colonial power imposed its own language as the official language of the country colonized. Because these policies upheld the European languages; they had a negative impact on the African languages. African languages suffered rejection. The indigenous languages were taught in the early grades of primary schooling by the Missionaries only to enable natives to access the bible (Magwa, 2007). As for the language of instruction in schools, the foreign languages dominated. Such a scenario meant that the languages of indigenous people were confined to sanctimonious trivial news items like in settling communal disputes of no economic or developmental significance thus it is seen by many as a mockery and degradation of indigenous languages.

Shona is the home language to over 75% of Zimbabweans while English is a native language to less than 1% of the country's population. What is surprising is the domination of such a 'small' language over indigenous languages spoken by more than 99% of Zimbabweans. English is used as the medium of instruction in the whole of the Zimbabwean education system (Grade 1- University level). The use of English as medium of instruction in the Zimbabwean Education System dates back to the colonial period where indigenous languages were marginalized in preference of the foreign language. These languages were neither used in the classroom nor were they official languages of the country (Magwa, 2006). At independence, unlike other African countries such as Tanzania who took bold decisions in introducing the mother tongue (Swahili) in education, Zimbabwe retained this exoglossic language policy which promoted a foreign language at the expense of the indigenous ones. Though the policy has undergone several amendments, the language policy has continued to be in favour of English over the indigenous languages. The 1987 policy states that prior to the fourth grade, Shona may be used as medium of instruction but this was never implemented as teachers preferred to use English (Nziramasanga, 1999). Up until 2006, all subjects in the primary schooling, thus from grade 4 to 7, have been taught in English except for the indigenous languages. Despite the alarming call for indiginisation of the language of education in many African countries especially in the primary school, the Education Amendment Bill of 2006 half-heartedly promoted Shona to be medium of instruction in all subjects up to grade 7. The bill states that "Shona may be used as medium of instruction prior to Form 1". The use of may gives room for an option to English which may be favoured by many because teachers are used to teaching in English and the economic rewards associated with proficiency in English. This room for an option shots down the whole purpose of introducing Shona in

the system. Our hope now lies in the implementation of the New Constitution which promises to take the promotion of indigenous languages seriously. In Chapter 1 Section 6 headed Languages, it is stated “The State must promote and advance the use of all languages used in Zimbabwe...” (p.22), the word must in this section suggest a new dimension.

This paper therefore, seeks to examine the implementation of the policy; it seeks to investigate the extent to which Shona is being used as medium of instruction in the primary schools where it has been promoted alongside English, a language that has mediated almost all teaching and learning in the primary school for decades.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design involving head teachers, teachers and pupils from the 19 Primary schools in Buhera South District. Five schools were randomly sampled for the study. Questionnaires were administered to heads of the selected schools and to a total of twenty teachers and fifty pupils randomly selected from grades 4 to 7, those grades that started using Shona as medium of instruction from 2006. Five grade 7 classes were observed. Interviews were carried out with all participants. Pupils were interviewed in groups of ten, ten pupils from each school. Researchers felt that the selected sample comprised of the key participants in the implementation of the policy.

## III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

From the research, it has been established that despite the 2006 Education Act giving a provision of using Shona as a medium of instruction at primary level, the situation on the ground seems to be heavily skewed towards the use of English. The research showed tissue rejection to the introduction of Shona as medium of instruction in primary schools alongside English. There was confusion in terms of the interpretation of the language policy. Whereas in some schools heads and teachers were able to interpret the policy correctly showing that English and Shona were options, at one school, the headmaster’s understanding of the policy was that the policy requires teachers to use both languages at the same time suggesting that teachers were free to code –switch to either English or Shona during the teaching-learning process. It was surprising to find out that in most of the schools, teachers expressed ignorance about the existence of such a policy. From the interviews with headmasters, it came out that information pertaining to the existence of this policy was not effectively and timely distributed to schools. In schools where the policy was known, the respective headmasters and teachers opted to use English since the policy offers the use of the two languages as options. Worthy noting from the headmasters’ sentiments with regard to how they feel about the policy was the issue of optionality where all the school heads concurred on criticizing the policy for giving room to either the use of English or Shona. They suggested that in future the policy must be mandatory so that there will be no excuses for failing to implement.

Reasons for favoring English were investigated. The research noted that a majority of the text books used by pupils at primary school level are in English and none are in Shona except for those of the Shona subject. Only two textbooks namely Living and Working Together and Faith in Action for grades 1 and 2 are in both English and Shona. Lessons observed by the researchers were also a living testimony of people’s obsession with the love of English as a medium of instruction. It was noted that during lessons English dominated the discussions and teachers together with the pupils could only code-switch to Shona when explaining difficult concepts to enhance understanding in pupils. In line with this Mkandawire (2005) noted that the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction minimizes learning hardships while maximizing understanding. Research by Chiwome and Mkandla in Herbert (1992) has shown that children all over the world learn better if taught in the mother tongue. In their research, they found out that pupils understand better if taught using Shona in subjects such as Maths and Science. The researchers noted that code-switching was rampant in most of the lessons observed. However, ninety percent (90%) 18/20 of the teachers interviewed indicated that as for grades 4 up to 7, they taught using more English than Shona because the Grade 7 examinations are English oriented. Despite the fact that teachers emphasized the use of English as medium of instruction, the researchers observed that a lot of pupils including those in higher grades had problems in expressing their views in English only. Code-switching was noted in all the lessons observed by the researcher despite efforts by the teachers of encouraging the use of English as a sole medium of instruction. All the teachers 20/20 (100%) admitted that they do code-switched to Shona because pupils failed to understand certain concepts explained in English. One teacher was frank to indicate that he often code-switched to Shona because he lacked proper terminology to explain certain concepts. He said that since English is a second language to him there was no way he could be proficient in it than he could be in Shona which is his mother tongue. His sentiments seem to be in line with those of Vygotsky in Alexander (2000) who says there is an intrinsic link between language and thought, regarding speech as an extension of intelligence.

In all the classes visited by the researchers, most of the teaching aids including wall charts were in English. Only charts for The Education for Living subject in grades one and two were written in both languages, English and Shona. As from grade 3 going upwards, English dominated as it was the medium on almost every teaching aid. All the headmasters 100% (5/5) indicated that they did not have textbooks written in the Shona language which could enable them to use Shona as a medium of instruction in teaching all the subjects. Interviewed teachers for grades three to seven concurred with what the headmasters said when they confessed that there were no text books in Shona for other subjects such as Content and Maths. The absolute majority of teachers, that is, 90% (18/20) who responded to the questionnaires

revealed that there were no textbooks written in Shona to enable them to teach other subjects using Shona. They added that it would be a mammoth task to use Shona as a medium of instruction when all learning materials are in English. There would be need for translating the material from English to Shona which was indicated not easy for many. Of great concern to most teachers were certain scientific terms in Content subjects which could be difficult to translate to Shona. The content of the subjects is closely modeled on the British pattern and so using an indigenous language in teaching was found to be difficult. Given such a scenario it was no surprise to see that most of the teaching aids were in English. Chimhundu (1993) views the lack of textbooks in Shona for subjects other than Shona as a sign of lack of commitment on the part of government. He adds that all the work aimed at the growth and development of Shona as a language has been left on the hands of individual organizations such as the African Languages Research Institute yet it must be government's responsibility. Chimhundu adds that the absence of a clear national language policy and the general lack of funding for language research are some of the major factors hindering initiatives in the research and documentation of local languages which had been deliberately denigrated to vernacular status by the colonial establishment. Many years after independence the problem of funding aimed at the growth of indigenous languages is still a problem.

What was disturbing in some of the schools visited by the researchers was that although 60% of the headmasters knew about the 2006 Education Act, (40%) of them indicated that they were finding difficulties in implementing it since most of their examinations are set in English. Teaching in Shona would create many problems for the candidates in the examinations. They would fail to interpret questions posed in English and to present their answers in the language. Some of the headmasters said that they only head of the policy through informal ways but all the heads of schools interviewed expressed dissatisfaction on the way the policy was communicated for they claimed that it was not properly and formally introduced to the schools. In addition to that the headmasters also said that the policy gives a provision of using English as sole medium thus justifying their stance of choosing English.

Ninety percent (90%) (18/20) of the teachers interviewed indicated that given the competition among schools with regard to grade seven results; it would be difficult to implement the policy because all grade seven examinations are set in English except for the Shona subject. This shows confusion in the crafting of our language policy. How can indigenous languages be used as media of instruction when the examination is still in the foreign language? Mutasa (2004) also feels it is puzzling to learn that Zimbabwe as country managed to localize its examinations but failed to indiginise the medium of instruction. This common in many African countries, they advocate for the use of indigenous languages as mediums of instruction but they do not have policies to support their intentions and desires (Mtenje, 2008).

Despite all these challenges, teachers and pupils agreed on the need to use Shona as a medium of instruction in the primary school. They agreed that the use of Shona enhance understanding in pupils during learning. Interviewed teachers indicated that on several occasions they are forced to code-switch to Shona so that pupils could understand concepts not grasped in English. One interviewed grade seven teacher said, *"Kudzidzisa ndichishandisa ChiShona kunoita kuti vana vangu vasanetseke kunzwisisa zvandinenge ndichivadzidzisa"* (Teaching using Shona enables my pupils to understand easily what I will be teaching them). Researchers also observed a high level of participation in classes they visited whenever the teacher allowed pupils to give their answers in Shona. All the teachers interviewed (100%) admitted that although they would desire to teach their pupils purely in English, circumstances such as the inability of most pupils to express themselves in English do force them to use Shona when teaching. One teacher who was observed teaching English had this to say, *"Ichokwadi kuti dzimwe nguva tinotoshandisa ChiShona kuti vana vanzwisisa kunyangwe zvazvo zvisingakukurudzirwi kuchidzidzo ichi."* (Yes, at times we are forced to code-switch to Shona for pupils to understand although it is not encouraged in the subject.). The researcher also observed that code-switching from English to Shona was more prevalent during Maths lessons. Sticking to English would compromise performance in the subject since the language of instruction (English) was not familiar to these rural pupils. This is a pointer towards the need for an effective language of instruction, the mother tongue because concepts are best understood when taught in the learner's language. No wonder why the study found out that participation was high whenever pupils were allowed to express their thoughts in Shona. This is because language is often regarded as an integrating force, a means by which participation is facilitated (Magwa, 2000). Prah (2000) says that there is no way pupils can do exceptionally well in a foreign language since all education can be best given through the medium of the learners' own language.

Although headmasters, teachers and pupils concurred on the advantages of using Shona as a medium of instruction, they also expressed their unending desire to use English. This was mainly because grade seven examinations are in English hence pupils need to be taught using the language of examination. All the headmasters 100% (5/5) interviewed said that schools are now ranged according to their performance at grade 7 examinations, as such those schools which do not perform well in their grade 7 examinations risk losing their pupils to other schools known for recording good pass rates. In addition to that one headmaster indicated that excelling students stand a good chance of getting bursaries for their secondary education. Teaching using English to a majority of the school heads offers a good opportunity for their pupils to pass their examinations. They also claimed that English has more appeal and market than Shona. One grade seven pupil said, *"Ndinoda kudzidziswa neChiRungu nekuti chinoita kuti ndiwane basa ndapedza chikoro"* (I want to be taught through the English medium because it gives me employment opportunities.). About 90% (45/50) of the pupils who filled in the questionnaires indicated that learning through the medium of English enhances their chances

of getting employment. No wonder why Alexander (2000) postulates that unless African languages are given market value, no amount of policy change at school level can guarantee their use in high status functions and, thus eventual escape from the dominance and the hegemony of English. One headmaster indicated that there is absence of a strong political will on the government to genuinely promote and develop indigenous languages to appreciable levels like using them as media of instruction in institutions of learning.

The researchers also noted that there was a general negative attitude towards the use of Shona as medium of instruction among headmasters and teachers. The same attitude was also evident to grade seven pupils interviewed by the researcher. The researchers found out that the problem begins at home where some parents look down upon their own language with shame and see them as unworthy of their children use and learn. This colonial mentality was also highlighted during a lecture on Educational Issues in 1983 by Zimbabwe's Permanent Secretary of Education and Culture. When asked about what language his children spoke at home, Permanent Secretary Sibanda replied, "...without English you are doomed. My children speak only English at home. Shona is a language that is dying out (Meyer, 1998, p. 70). If such comments come from the very people who must be at the forefront of advocating for the indigenisation of the medium of instruction, it makes the whole issue complicated. No wonder why Ansre (1979) in Phillipson (1992) says that the minds and lives of speakers of African Languages are dominated by other languages to the point that they believe that they can only use foreign languages when it comes to more advanced aspects of life such as education. It appears there is need for mental decolonization for people to appreciate that Shona can be used as medium of instruction just like English. Mkandawire (2005) says, people need to be convinced that these languages which are world languages of communication today, were once considered "languages of barbarians," unfit for the communication of knowledge at the time when Greek and Latin were the languages of civilization par excellence.

All the headmasters interviewed thus 5 out of 5 (100%) indicated that in order for Shona to be meaningfully promoted particularly in the domain of education, it is not enough to simply have language policies that allow for the use of these languages in this domain, but there must be willingness on the part of the government to make a deliberate effort to increase the market value of Shona as a language. One teacher said that the fact that a pupil is considered to have passed Ordinary level if he or she has five subjects including English language is a sure sign that English is regarded more important than Shona. He went on to say that even on the job market, a pass in English is a prerequisite for any employment opportunity or academic pursuit. Alexander (Ibid) says there must be an articulated programme of job creation and employment on the basis of indigenous language proficiencies as part of the affirmative action.

The shortage of textbooks written in Shona to be used in other subjects is one challenge that was highlighted by teachers as a reason as to why they opted to continue using English as the medium of instruction despite the 2006 Education Act giving the provision of using Shona as a medium of instruction. One teacher interviewed said, "*Hazvibviri kuti tidzidzise tichishandisa Shona nekuti hapana mabhuku emuzvidzidzo zvisiri Shona ari mumutauru uyu.*" (It is not practical for us to teach using Shona because there are no books in Shona for the respective subjects). This complicates the whole issue of indigenizing the language of instruction in schools. Most teachers who were interviewed were expressing the need to have books in various subjects be printed in Shona before the policy is implemented. Their sentiments concur with those of Coombs (1985) who says that the infrastructure in the school system is based on English as the medium of instruction, there are a number of African languages without a written form and this makes the practice of indigenizing the language of instruction very expensive. Of course Shona has gone greater strides in trying to amass enough books to be used but there is a long way to go before it can effectively be used as medium of instruction in schools. Books such as dictionaries and grammar are now in Shona but they are not enough if Shona is to be given the high status of being the language of education.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that generally Shona is not opted for as medium of instruction in the primary schools of the district. This is mainly because some headmasters and teachers are not aware of the development. They do not have any idea pertaining to the introduction of Shona as language of instruction from grade 4 upwards. There is lack of follow up mechanisms to the implementation of the policy by the ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture. To some, the use of Shona in the teaching of other subjects is still a bit challenging since textbooks and examinations are through the medium of English. From the research, it was also noted that there are still a few people who have a negative attitude towards the use of Shona as a medium of instruction in the education fraternity. However, most of the teachers and pupils pointed out the need for indigenizing the language of education in primary schooling. All participants admitted the prevalence of code-switching during the teaching and learning process mainly to enhance understanding in pupils. Teachers felt that sticking to the official medium of instruction would also hinder communication in the classroom. The study therefore, recommends that:

- the policy should be clear on the use of Shona as medium of instruction
- the ministry should make sure that policies reach the targeted people
- the language of instruction should be the language of the exam.
- there is need to increase the market value of Shona.
- there must be a serious follow up to make sure there is full implementation of any language policy put in place.

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