

# Mother Tongue Instruction for Lower Primary School Level in Zimbabwe – A Half Hearted Commitment to the Development of her Indigenous Languages

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## Abstract

The paper interrogates the government's commitment to the development of indigenous languages in the primary school system as mirrored in the languages in education policy. The amended education act of 2006 dictates that in Zimbabwe's primary schools, early learning must be done via mother tongue instruction and later on English is to be introduced, both as a second language (L2) and as a school subject taught on equal time basis with other indigenous languages. By the nature of lower primary education, mother tongue instruction is viewed as a necessity as it bridges the gap between the child's home environment and the new school environment as well as reducing culture shock associated with the rapid introduction of a new language. It has generally been agreed that children tend to understand better if they are taught in their mother tongue (L1) In this article, we argue that this proclamation in the education act seems to be a half hearted commitment to the growth and development of Zimbabwe's indigenous languages in so much as several other systems like teacher training and deployment practices are not in tandem and in synch with this requirement. The non availability of literature in a host of other indigenous languages mainly regarded as minor does not help the case either. In essence, this article is both a critique of the Zimbabwean policy of languages in the education sector as enshrined in the education act as well as a proposal for remedial future action to try and redress the predicament that indigenous languages have to contend with as far as early primary school education is concerned. We argue that the non committal attitude by the government to invest in indigenous languages is symptomatic of a culture that has been manifest since the early days of independence which gains expression in the absence of a comprehensive national language policy which articulates clearly the need for the uplifting and consequent development of Zimbabwe's indigenous languages.

**Keywords:** Mother Tongue Instruction, Indigenous Languages, Primary School, Zimbabwe

## 1. Introduction

With the attainment of independence by most African states from the 1960s, the status of African indigenous languages vis'a vis that of the foreign, colonial languages has been lamentable. The role that indigenous African languages have to play in the transmission of knowledge has in most cases been understated and trivialized. Just as in most African states, Zimbabwe's indigenous languages have remained backgrounded in the education sector, where English, the foreign medium continues with its hegemonic dominance as a language of instruction in schools. Despite a host of empiricised benefits of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction, the Zimbabwean education system continues to favour English as epitomized by the non committal attitude exhibited by the authorities to challenge the status quo and enforce the use of mother tongues as media of instruction in primary schools. Communication can only take place through the use of languages mastered by the people. Thus, linguistic issues become inseparable from issues related to development. In fact, for development to take place in Africa, it has to be thought, designed, implemented and monitored primarily in local indigenous languages.

## 2. The case for Mother Tongue Instruction

The multilingual realities of the African continent, hugely credited to the multi ethnicity of the continent and partly to the legacy of colonialism which left African states burdened with an extra language have inevitably led to the never ending debate on languages to be taught in schools and those to be used as medium of instruction especially in the lower rungs of the education system. Most African governments have responded by crafting legislation that will guide the use of languages in the education system in light of the societal multilingualism. According to Wolff (2000b), language in Africa is a very sensitive issue mainly because of its history and its current neo-colonial relationship with former colonial powers, multilateral agencies and organizations; and yet, multilingualism and multiculturalism are integral features of African reality. This multilingualism is facilitated by the fact that Africa is home to about one third of the world's living languages. In fact, there are between 1200 and 2000 languages on the continent. This asset has been distorted as a threat to national unity and used to justify the use of the official or foreign language in government business and as the primary medium of instruction in

education. Fasold (1984) has argued that multilingual states have more problems than monolingual states do, as this may lead to difficulties in communication and can generally be socially disruptive. Not only does multilingualism militate against ease of communication, but it can also be problematic in the quest for national unity, especially given the importance of language for nationalism (Fasold 1984).

Language in Africa is essentially tied to ethnicity and multilingualism implies multi ethnicity, hence before one can belong to a state, they first and foremost belong to an ethnic group. In light of this, conflict situations arise even in the education sector where governments have to grapple with the choice of the languages to be elevated to media of instruction. The choice of one indigenous language over another may thus be interpreted as tantamount to the elevation of that particular ethnic group which speaks the chosen language, albeit at the expense of the competing alternatives. It is in light of this that most African governments have chosen to use English as the official medium of instruction in schools, obviously from the perceived neutrality of the English language. Yet in fact it is a mother tongue of no native Zimbabwean. The choice of English is also given the stamp of authenticity by the positive attitudes that indigenous people have towards the English language albeit to the detriment of their own languages as observed by Ferguson (2013:18) when he comments that;

English, moreover, is not only a language of socio-economic aspiration, but a concept, an idea attractive to the young, because it indexes desirable identities. Elites, similarly, often view English as indexical of modernity, development and globalisation, and they promote the language on these grounds and as a means for transcending ethnic attachments in the interests of national unity.

Be that as it may, mother tongue instruction remains very crucial especially in the early years of the child's schooling. The benefits of mother tongue instruction are widely publicized and appreciated universally. The UNESCO report of 1953 on vernacular languages in education categorically states that it is axiomatic that every child has a right to attend school, and it is also necessary that every child be taught in their mother tongue although the report appreciates the difficulties of using certain languages as media of instruction because of their lack of the written form or standardization. However, despite the rhetoric that most African languages are incapable of complex expression, the UNESCO report emphatically pronounces that no language is too primitive or backward to become medium of instruction. This proclamation set the tone for the challenging of the status quo with regards to the commonly held belief that the English language is better equipped to deal with technical subjects over and above being a world language, whose benefits accrue for somebody fluent in it, namely employment opportunities and a chance to interact with the elite of the time.

Nonetheless, mother tongue instruction also has innumerable benefits that need to be appreciated. To the child, several issues are of benefit. Instruction in the mother tongue means that the child is taught all the subjects via a medium that they comprehend, and they are familiar with. As such, the learners are not burdened with the task of learning a new medium over and above learning of new concepts. Pflapsen (2011) notes that children who understand the language of instruction are more likely to attend school at appropriate times and regularly as compared to those who receive instruction in a foreign language. These are more susceptible to dropping out of school compared to the former. This inevitably leads to improved education efficiency. Smits et al (2008) argue that children taught in their mother tongue are five times less likely to repeat the same grade more than three times. This cements the case for mother tongue instruction in Zimbabwean schools as in other African countries. The use of unfamiliar languages forces teachers to use traditional and teacher-centered teaching methods which undermine teachers' effort to teach and learners' effort to learn. Teachers do most of the talking while children remain silent or passive participants during most of the classroom interactions. Because children do not speak the languages of instruction, teachers are also forced to use traditional teaching techniques such as chorus teaching, repetition, memorization and recall, code-switching and safe talk. In this context, authentic teaching and learning cannot take place. Such a situation accounts largely for the school ineffectiveness and low academic achievement experienced by learners. Therefore, the introduction of the Education Act of 1987(amended in 2006) was seen as a tool that would alleviate the aforementioned challenges.

Pflapsen (2011) further identifies improvement in reading and learning outcomes as the threadbare benefit of mother tongue instruction. It is argued that one's first language is important both for language and cognitive developments as well as academic achievement. Evidence is cited from studies carried out in Cameroon, India, Mali, the Philippines, South Africa and Vietnam which show that children learn to read faster in their mother tongue because they already have an idea of the language through the existing repository of vocabulary that they already possess before they attend school acquired naturally through interaction.

The child's concept of self-identity is enhanced and improved through mother tongue instruction as they are made to value their language and its importance. Given the importance of language in the construction of identity in the child as it is with adult speakers, mother tongue cements and constructs the child's identity. This has the much appreciated outcome of encouraging diversity rather than assimilation. A linguistically diverse nation is by far an interesting place to live in and is a vibrant society that does not only encourage tolerance of one linguistic group by another, but also reduces chances of polarization as speakers of different languages will

view themselves as equals if their languages are treated as such. Local cultural practices are supported and enhanced through mother tongue instruction, given the role that language plays in the transmission of culture. Parental participation and general interest in their children's school work is inevitable if the children are taught in the language that parents are familiar with.

Mother tongue instruction in the child's early years at school has been viewed as necessary in so far as it creates a bridge between the child's home environment and the new school environment. This has been seen as a necessary remedy in reducing the culture shock that the child may suffer in trying to rapidly adapt to the new school requirements that may involve, among many, the rapid introduction of a new language. The child who is immersed in these new concepts, media and a new environment may 'choke' from it and may develop disliking for school. It is thus necessary that the child be taught in their mother tongue as they try to navigate their way around the new demands.

The above, inter-alia, make a strong case for mother tongue instruction in the lower levels of the child's schooling. Universal access to primary education, Millennium Development goal number 2(MDG 2) will be achieved through this. African states, have responded to the demands posed by multilingualism by enacting legislation tailored towards the use of indigenous languages in the education sector especially in lower primary school.

### **3.Mother Tongue Instruction in the Zimbabwe's Education Act**

Since the publication in 1953 of the UNESCO Report on The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education, African countries have been struggling to find an effective strategy that allows them to move from an education system inherited from the colonial period to a more transformative and culturally relevant education that takes into consideration African values and languages, people's socio-cultural and linguistic background as well as their educational needs. Such a relevant and effective education strategy would be characterized, first of all, by the use of an appropriate medium of instruction, the use of adequate teaching techniques, the use of culturally adequate curriculum content and sufficient financial and material resources. Zimbabwe also committed herself to such a strategy through the introduction of an Education Act.

The Zimbabwe's languages in education policy, enshrined in the Education Act of 1987, as amended in 2006 is one such response to societal multilingualism in the education domain. It has been observed that language-in-education policies are at the core of African development. In multilingual settings, the question of language choice for both medium of instruction and school subject is crucial if Zimbabwe is to achieve development. In the multilingual approach, it is expected that both the relevant local language and the foreign language must have their appropriate place and methods of teaching. Instruction in the mother tongue contributes far more to the cultural, affective, cognitive and socio-psychological development of the child than instruction in a foreign language. The amended Education Act of 2006 in section 62 part X11 headed 'languages to be taught in schools', reads;

1. Subject to this section, all three main languages of Zimbabwe namely Shona, Ndebele and English shall be taught on an equal time basis in all schools up to form two levels.
2. In areas where indigenous languages other than those mentioned in subsection (1) above are spoken, the minister may authorize the teaching of such languages in schools in addition to those specified in subsection (1).
3. The minister may authorize the teaching of foreign languages in schools.
4. Prior to form one, any one of the languages referred to in subsection (1) and (2) may be used as medium of instruction, depending upon which language is commonly spoken and better understood by the pupils.
5. Sign language shall the priority medium of instruction for the deaf and the hard of hearing

The proclamation is unambiguous in its pronouncement that mother tongue should be made the language of instruction in the child's first years of learning. It is also unequivocal in its advocacy for the development of mother tongue to subject level as well.

### **4.The Obtaining State of Affairs**

We move on to discuss the obtaining situation on the ground, vis-a vis the pronouncements made by the languages in education policy as enunciated in the Education Act. In light of the benefits of mother tongue instruction discussed above the implementation of the provisions of the Education Act in the education sector remains a fallacy, in as much as it is half hearted and sometimes confused with respect to mother tongue instruction. Such a state of affairs does not do justice to the learners themselves and to the indigenous languages concerned. Due to a plethora of reasons, English remains the preferred medium of instruction even from grade one as it is conveniently seen as neutral. The functioning of the education sector is not in synch with the requirements of the policy. This is evident in the training and deployment of teachers who are expected to be mother tongue instructors of the same children. A lack of commitment in the development of materials in the

indigenous languages, especially in the so called minority languages is a cause for concern. The lack of legislation to enforce the provisions has not helped the situation either. These are some of the stumbling blocks militating against the fulfillment of the MDG2 in Zimbabwe and they are discussed below.

#### **4.1 Teacher Training and Deployment Policy**

One of the major problems highlighted in all the reviewed studies is the inadequacy of the existing teacher training programmes. Ngu (2004) in his assessment of teacher training institutions in Africa concluded that current dominant teacher-training programs were developed before most African countries got their political independence. This implies that student-teachers are being prepared hitherto to teach in languages that are unfamiliar to children. This largely accounts for the recurrent educational problems faced by Zimbabwean primary school learners. Due to lack of adequate training in the local languages teachers do not know how to effectively monitor and assess student learning. This could also lead to the fact that the achievement tests administered to pupils might not be valid and reliable.

In a study carried out by Gondo and Gondo (2012) it is noted that there are a lot of inconsistencies in the training of indigenous language teachers in Zimbabwe. They observe that while all trainee students are supposed to do a course in English and either ChiShona or IsiNdebele, all the other indigenous languages like Sotho, Nambya, Kalanga, Tonga, Nyanja, Chewa, Barwe, Hwesa, Venda and Shangani are not offered. This is despite the fact that the Education Act makes it compulsory to teach all local languages and the other subjects using local languages dominant in the area where the school is found for the first three grades of primary school. This is a very remarkable omission by teachers' training institutions when one considers that these languages are supposed to be taught in the schools. This omission has far reaching repercussions on the general preparedness and their teaching abilities on completion of training. Consequently, Instead of schools becoming knowledge reservoirs they tend to isolate learners from the collaborative and participatory learning that are the foundation of indigenous cultures and indigenous education systems.

Of note again is that the teacher deployment policy is not in tandem with the indigenous language areas in terms of the demographic spread of indigenous language groups. For example, it has been noticed that in most primary schools in Matabeleland provinces, despite the areas being predominantly Ndebele speaking, non Ndebele speaking teachers are deployed to teach in these areas. This becomes quite an antithesis and is inconsistent with the requirements. A survey we carried out in primary schools in Matabeleland revealed that in most schools in Matabeleland, L1 Shona speaking teachers outnumber Ndebele teachers in primary schools yet the same are expected to deliver lessons to a predominantly Ndebele class using the Ndebele language as the medium of instruction (according to the Act). This is quite paradoxical and tantamount to shooting oneself in the foot. The former Minister of Education, Arts Sports and Culture in the then inclusive government was quoted by the *Newsday* of January 31<sup>st</sup> 2011 acknowledging the predicament bedeviling his ministry with respect to mother tongue instruction at primary level. He argued that in Zimbabwe, teacher training remains the prerogative of the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education which may not always be apprised on the needs of lower educational levels. As such, the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sports and Culture that presides over primary education do not have a say in the training of teachers in terms of curriculum needs. Inevitably, the Ministry finds itself in a catch twenty two situation whereby it is expected to implement mother tongue instruction yet some of the key institutions that are paramount to the implementation of that requirement are controlled by a different ministry.

#### **4.2 Minority languages**

While the predicament for major indigenous languages like the two national languages Ndebele and Shona are lamentable, the picture gets even darker with the state of the so called minority languages. A shortage in teachers trained to teach in indigenous languages is not catastrophic when juxtaposed to a nullity of trained teachers from minority communities. Most previously marginalized communities have contributed very little to teachers colleges in terms of student numbers, primarily due to the historical and sociopolitical background which has, until recently excluded minority communities from mainstream social and economic development of the country. The shortage of schools in Matabeleland North province of Zimbabwe, which coincidentally is a home to a large number of Zimbabwe's minority communities implies that an insignificant number of people make it to teachers colleges. Therefore, we argue that the state of these minority languages in terms of representation in the education sector is cause for concern. Most teachers in these communities are mother tongue speakers of Ndebele and Shona yet the area is occupied predominantly by the Tonga, the Nambya, the Nyanja and Chewa speakers. It becomes a herculean task to expect, let alone to talk about mother tongue instruction in such cases.

The Education Act is not totally committed to ensuring that these minority languages are taught at all cost. The use of the word '*may*' in subsection (2) of the Act shows that the act is not dogmatic and forceful in its commitment. It is solely the prerogative of the Minister to order the teaching of these languages. The speakers of the languages are left out. As such it is not surprising that the teaching of minority languages has been implemented at a snail pace.



### 4.3 Teaching Materials

It is also noted that the teaching practice and the development of literacy have also been negatively impacted by a severe lack of appropriate educational materials, teachers' guides, textbooks, and reference books in the mother tongues. Mabaso (2007) commenting on the teaching of Shangani, argues that another major problem is the unavailability of written materials for use in schools. The teachers responsible for teaching the so called minority languages have to translate either Shona or Ndebele texts. Most of the minority languages that are taught have no standard orthographies. As a result of that, teachers use diverse orthographies in the classroom leaving the learner more confused than before. A telling example is when the writers of Venda texts had to rely on the South African Venda orthography and terminology for coming up with the texts for Zimbabwean learners. On strict sociolinguistic terms, the dangers of using the cross border terminology are detrimental to the purity of the Zimbabwean variety of Venda. It is expected that the Zimbabwean Venda and the South African Venda are different as these languages are in contact with different languages on either sides of the border. Not only that, but also the environment in the Zimbabwean and South African sides are different, from the food, to the vegetation and to the generality of the cultural norms, and as such, the language varieties are expected to be reflective of such inevitable differences. There seems to be a few government projects for the development of these languages. This is seen as government's half heartedness towards language development, probably because it is occupied with other issues considered of more importance.

Former Senator and Minister, David Coltart is on record as quoted in the *Newsday* acknowledging the fact that for the past 30 years, no texts or educational materials have been published in minority languages and has equated this synonymously to the indictment of the education sector. It is only recently that primary school texts have been published, mostly in Tonga, notably the BWACHA LINO series and in Nambya. Otherwise prior to this, there were no texts to talk about. The availability of textbooks nevertheless does not constitute a sufficient condition for the successful mother tongue instruction in the absence of trained teachers to help the learners to make sense of the texts.

### 4.4 Attitudes towards Mother Tongue Instruction

Attitudes of teachers, learners and the community at large are also impeding on the successful implementation of mother tongue instruction in Zimbabwe's education sector. These attitudes can be presented at different levels. The silence and lack of support from the teachers in using the mother tongue instruction can be very isolating for the learners. This isolation results in the learners feeling confused and embarrassed. Such situations do not provide equal learning opportunities because those who cannot articulate issues in English are left out of the learning process. According to Shizha (2012) some teachers argue that English is a tool for international and global communication and integration. Teachers who were interviewed for this study also concurred with Shizha's (2012) observation. They also argued that African indigenous languages lack scientific and technical competency to be media of instruction. The teachers' attitudes also contribute to the learners' negative attitudes towards the use of indigenous languages and positive attitude towards English. Awonusi (2004:97) notes that;

The notion of hegemonic English implies the perception of the English Language as a significant linguistic superstructure that has a wide usage and acceptance as well as influence. Thus hegemony with relation to language connotes a fairly complex interplay of a number of variables such as power (socio-economic power of its users), control (how the powerful users of a particular language use it as a weapon of linguistic domination of communities especially those that are multilingual or multicultural), legitimacy (the dependence on a language as the basis of social and political acceptance) and influence (the exercise of power...)

Indigenous African languages continue to be subordinate to English to the extent that in most schools in Zimbabwe, speaking in indigenous languages is considered as a vice. The local languages are vilified in the education sector in a society already marginalized by the forces of history. The negative framing of African languages is evident ironically in the school setup, which is supposed to be the leading voice in the uplifting of the same. Corporal punishment is sometimes administered to students who are heard conversing in local languages and resultant, negative attitudes are cultivated in the student while positive attitudes accrue with respect to English. Commenting on the perceived superiority of English compared to African languages, Bamgbose (1998; 9) observes that;

The effects of the continued dominance can be seen in alienation resulting in unfavourable attitudes to African languages. The attitudes may be illustrated in the preference for early acquisition of these languages (with two-year-olds being made to speak English or French in elite homes), taking pride in proficiency in the imported languages at the expense of a sound knowledge of one's own mother tongue, preference for written communication in a European language, addiction to information disseminated in imported languages by electronic and print media, and lack of interest in, and concern for, the development of indigenous languages.

The colonial pedagogy was aimed at brainwashing the African to view himself as a second class citizen whose only sole chance out of poverty was via the Anglicized means. This mentality is still evident 33 years after

Zimbabwe attained independence. According to Ngara (1985), the colonialists wanted as much as possible to obliterate the African cultural authenticity so as to create an African who was desperate to be saved from himself and as such, everything African was to be demonized and rendered pagan. This has led to the non belief in African languages as playing an agentive role in development. As was argued earlier, the languages in the education policy must be aligned to the cause of redressing the predicament that her own languages face today due to what Royneland (ibid) refers to as 'historical accidents of colonialism and neo colonialism when he says;

. . . what continues to be of great concern to many in Africa is the fact that even after independence not only are European languages still being maintained within the educational system, but very little is being done to develop African languages which had suffered over a century of neglect. This state of affairs is what Djite (2004: 1) refers to as "the most painful and absurd interface between Africa and the rest of the world". The fact is that Africa is the only continent in the world in which language-in-education "is largely exogenous to the society it seeks to serve".

Attitudes towards mother tongue are bound to continue in the negative trend until visible steps are taken with the aim of changing perceptions and developing indigenous languages so as to ensure their functional diversification. The governments half hearted commitment to mother tongue instruction in the education system is, according to Royneland (1996) deliberate and can be explained in the elitist rulership of 'fear of the unknown' and is therefore evident in the implicit policy to 'let the sleeping dogs lie'.

The government has not since after independence engaged in or facilitated sociolinguistic surveys so as to ascertain the demographic spread of Zimbabwe's mother tongues with the aim of crafting informed policy statements with regards to languages in education. The basis for policies of languages in education is the 1931 report by Clemence Doke who was tasked by the colonial government to research and advise on the varieties of languages spoken by the natives. To date, Doke's report, the only comprehensive but not necessarily accurate document has been used as the guiding yardstick in formulating policies; albeit in an ad-hoc and piecemeal fashion. To assume for example, that in the city of Bulawayo the language that is predominantly spoken is Ndebele is to make a very dangerous generalization. To assume therefore, that most learners would be conversant in the Ndebele language would be too pedestrian as well. There have been, since the publication of Doke's report in 1931, various social dynamics that have led to intercity and interprovincial migration and other linguistic groups have settled in Matabeleland and Bulawayo in particular. As a result, in other cases, classes in schools are made up of 50% Ndebele speakers and 50% Shona speakers. Emigration into South Africa by the predominantly Ndebele speakers in search of greener pastures, and the subsequent immigration into Bulawayo by the Shona speakers to fill the void has resulted in a huge distortion of the current composition of the city in terms of language dynamics. There is need, therefore, for comprehensive sociolinguistic surveys that would give a more current picture of the demographic characteristics of Zimbabwe so that mother tongue instruction is carried out in a manner that will not prejudice learners due to such crippling assumptions.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the provisions and guidelines for teaching and use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in the UNCESO report, the implementation of mother tongue instruction in post-colonial Zimbabwe remains rudimentary, (Royneland 1996). As the paper has argued, there are various forces militating against the successful mother tongue instruction for lower primary school level in Zimbabwe and these have essentially thrived in the absence of a comprehensive national language policy that clearly defines the roles of the different indigenous languages. Coupled with the lack of clear legislature that enforces mother tongue instruction, the negative attitudes by teachers and learners alike towards mother tongue instruction do not help the case either and serious attitude engineering should be undertaken to ensure the survival of mother tongue in the Zimbabwean education sector. Sociolinguistic surveys are also necessary if informed mother tongue instruction policies are to be achieved. These surveys may culminate in demystifying certain misconceptions of the demographic aspects of languages. The importance of mother tongue instruction may remain back grounded in the Zimbabwe's education sector if remedial efforts at reclamation are not initiated.

## 6. Recommendations

These recommendations include: the adoption of an adequate and overt language education policy; the reform of the teacher training programs to account for the new education language policies; the integration of innovative teaching methods, taking teachers sociolinguistic profiles into account for their placement into schools and the development of culturally relevant curricula.

Assuming that the above issues have been taken care of the final stage involves implementation in the schools. For this to take place, there has to be a buy in from a number of stakeholders who have to be convinced of the broad benefits of mother-tongue education, not merely in a cognitive sense, but in a much larger socio-economic context. The stakeholders include government, education officials, school governing bodies, headmasters,

teachers, and, most importantly, parents and pupils. If pupils and their parents do not actively desire mother tongue instruction, then all the effort will not make the policy viable. And for this yearning to be inculcated, parents and their children will have to see that mother-tongue education leads to conspicuous benefits in such spheres as economic empowerment, social mobility and influence, and pathways to further academic opportunities.

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