The ‘Mother Tongue as Media of Instruction’ Debate Revisited: A Case of David Livingstone Primary School in Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract
This paper reports the findings of a research carried out at David Livingstone Primary School in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study sought to assess the impact of the medium of instruction on the performance of two Grade 6 classes. Data were collected through interviews, lesson observations and document analysis. From the findings of the study, it was concluded that learners learn better and benefit more from the education system if the medium of instruction is the same language they use at home. This would normally mean Shona in Harare; however interesting findings emerged from this study. There is a new crop of Zimbabwean pupils who seem to have been ignored in the medium of instruction debate, those pupils who now use English as a first language at home despite having Shona (by origin) parents. Furthermore, there are pupils whose L1 is neither Shona nor English, those from the Ndebele and other minority language speaking groups. What then happens to these pupils if the medium of instruction is to be changed to suit the majority of the pupils who are Shona first language speakers? In a bid to accommodate students from various linguistic backgrounds and consequently improve results, the study recommends the adoption of a model that fosters multilingual competencies and boosts learning achievement, that is, a strong additive bilingual model. However, the paper cautions that this kind of model may face a lot of resistance from both the policy makers and the masses owing to Africa’s greatest enemy, that is, the colonial mentality.

Keywords: mother tongue, medium of instruction, multilingualism, additive bilingualism, subtractive bilingualism

INTRODUCTION
The Euro-centric ‘tragic trilogy of slave trade, colonialism and neo colonialism’ has indeed left an indelible imprint on the African socio-political landscape. In spite of having gained their independence decades ago, African states persistently sacrifice their dignity, character and identity in the name of globalization. This is particularly evident in the continued use of the languages of the former colonial masters in all spheres. This scenario has excited intense interest and enquiry from various professions of concern. The most heated debates emerge from the field of education where the concern lies on which language should be used as a medium of instruction? The debate pits ‘pragmatic’ linguists who call for the continued use of foreign languages as media of instruction and the ‘patriotic’ linguists who root for the indigenous languages. The former attribute the continued use of European languages to purely practical and functional purposes and the latter focus more on socio-political factors (Bangbbose, 1991).

Zimbabwe’s Linguistic Situation at a Glance
Like most African countries, Zimbabwe is a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual society. The country has over 17 African languages. English, the language of the former colonial master, is the only official language, while Shona and Ndebele are national languages. There are more than 14 minority languages, these are, Chewa, Shangani, Tonga, Hwesa Chikunda, Sotho, Xhosa, Sena, Tshwawo, Barwe, Venda, Kalanga, Nambya and Tswana. The minority groups constitute approximately 10% of the total Zimbabwean population (Thondhlana, 2002). English is the sole medium of instruction in the schools. Although the language policy as given in the 2006 Amendment of the Education Act, stipulates that the local languages can be used as media of instruction up to Grade 7, this cannot be effectively enforced since the examinations are in English. Only Ndebele and Shona are examined in those languages. The minority languages have never been examined at any level with the exception of Tonga which was first written at Grade 7 level in 2011, this is because the policy originally allowed these languages to be taught up to Grade 3 only.

The Debate
Many scholars have dedicated their time on the issue of which medium of instruction is the best for effective learning? A few scholars who advocate for the use of the mother tongue will be discussed and then attention will be turned to the arguments against mother tongue instruction. Herbert (1992) asserts that the mother tongue should be used as a medium of
instruction; it is the most appropriate means for effective teaching because it has the learner’s experiences. It is a language that he knows well and can use to form sentences and express himself. The UNESCO (1953:11) document effectively summarises the virtues of the mother tongue:

Psychologically it is the system of meaningful signs that in the child’s mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.

Pupils learn more quickly in their mother tongue because they easily identify with it than a foreign language. The mother tongue also allows for proper social integration in schools and therefore helps avoid maladjustment in children. In a maze of unfamiliar things, the child has at least the familiar mother tongue to hold on to. This sentiment is echoed by a Namibian psychologist Dr Shaun Whittaker cited in Totemeyer (2010) who states in no uncertain terms that sudden immersion in a language unfamiliar to children has failed every single African country that tried to implement it. The acquisition of the European medium of instruction is rendered very difficult because of the lack of reinforcement outside the classroom situation, since most pupils revert to their mother tongue once they are out of the classroom.

It has been proved many a times that children learn best only when they are highly proficient in the medium of instruction. According to Ngara (1982) in Tanzania most students’ performance in subjects taught in English was found to be quite appalling, while many were said to be passing the two subjects taught in Swahili, that is, Kiswahili and Siasa (political education). In a reading literacy test done in 32 countries, Zimbabwe included, by Elley (1992), students whose home language was that of a school had an easier transition into reading than those who had to learn a new language while they learn to read. Non native speaking groups scored lower levels on reading literacy tests which we wrote in English at the end of Grade 10 were devastating, only 15% of the learners passed, (KotzA, 1994). Parents were shocked and could not understand why their children who had never repeated any grade had failed, teachers of course were blamed. But the language specialists realized that the medium of instruction was the main cause of this tragedy. All these cases point to the fact that the mother tongue is the best medium to use in instructing students if they are to reach their potential. What is puzzling therefore is that despite these glaring advantages of using indigenous languages as media of instruction, Zimbabwe and other African countries still stick to European languages. Arguments for the retention of these European languages have been put forward; a critical analysis of these arguments will be given in the ensuing discussion.

According to Phillipson (1992) the arguments used to promote English can be classified into three sets relating to capacities: English intrinsic arguments or what English is, resources: English extrinsic arguments or what English has, and uses: English functional arguments, or what English does. Of interest here is that these arguments are very convincing and are articulated in political and academic discourse, they draw nourishment from ‘common sense’ that typifies hegemonic beliefs and practices such that Africans have internalized them and now believe English is ‘the’ language.

English intrinsic arguments describe English as rich, varied, noble and well adapted for change and development, while African languages are identified as not being endowed with equivalent qualities. They are not sufficiently developed or modernized to deal with the fast pace of development in the global village and cannot express the intricacies of modern science. But linguists argue that languages can fulfil any function, hence not intrinsically superior or inferior to any other language. Through adoption, adaption and loaning the incorporation of modern science would not be as difficult as the English-intrinsic arguments claim. This is quite possible as some professors in the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Zimbabwe have proven when they translated advanced science books from English to Ndebele which is a Zimbabwean indigenous language (Mnkandla, 2000). Actually English was once regarded as a language of the barbarians not good enough to express civilized ideas during Greek and Latin times, but today it is ‘the’ universal language. It therefore follows that with enough commitment and will the indigenous languages can be developed. African languages may indeed have a simpler structure, morphological, syntactic or phonetic but arguably this makes them even easier to learn. English is therefore in no way a
God given decree. The English intrinsic arguments also blend into arguments of the other two types.

The other argument is that teaching in African languages is not possible because of the lack of teaching materials and trained African cadres. These problems, it is argued, can be obviated by adopting English as a medium of instruction. On the other hand it is a well known fact that English has both material resources, (teaching materials, literature, dictionaries, publishers and so on), and immaterial resources (knowledge and skills). These are English extrinsic arguments which on the surface seem to be quite sound and foolproof. But the implementation of local languages as media of instruction can be done in a restricted or gradual manner while the material for the indigenous languages is being developed and the staff trained.

English-functional arguments credit English with the capacity to unite people within a country and across nations, or with furthering of international understanding. The multiplicity of languages renders the ideals of mother tongue medium impracticable. Many African countries are multilingual in varying degrees ranging from a few languages in Somalia to about 286 in Cameroon, and 400 in Nigeria (Mkandawire, 2005). A choice of one language as a medium of instruction may be seen as the rejection of another, this might destroy the "...delicate national unity" (Kotey and Der-Houssikian, 1977:40). Therefore to avoid the danger of divisiveness associated with the selection of a national language, the African leaders have opted for the Europeanisation of the media of instruction. If these arguments are correct, then one fails to see how they apply to almost linguistically homogeneous nations such as Lesotho and Swaziland where multilingualism is absent or is almost absent, but where English instead of Sotho and Swati remains the medium of instruction. Bambgose (1991) notes that some of the real causes of divisiveness in African countries have nothing to do with language. Otheguy (1982) further argues that the history of war suggests that economic, political and religious differences are prominent as causes. Language is seldom the cause of conflict. Religious crusades and jihads, rivalries between different political parties and economic aggression tend to be the instigators of strife. In most cases, exploitation by the elites in order to gain political and economic advantage divides the people. Unfortunately the Africans have internalised and accepted this argument wholeheartedly.

The cost of providing education in so many languages is considered prohibitive. But a gradual approach would be cost effective in the long run. First of all, mother tongue education may begin with a few selected languages based on demographic considerations or on consideration of standardization, (i.e., languages already committed to writing) for example Shona and Ndebele in Zimbabwe, subsequently the policy can be gradually extended to other languages as resources permit. While English is essential in Africa for maintaining international communication and exchange, there is increasing awareness among some African scholars and intellectuals that limiting African intellectual, academic, technical and scientific discourse to English is inadequate and in fact counterproductive. It was against this background that the researcher went into the field with the aim of finding out the impact of the medium of instruction on student performance at primary school level.

METHODOLOGY

Approach and Design

This study was basically qualitative in nature thus allowing for a holistic and contextual analysis of the problem. A case study design was adopted to ensure an in-depth study of the impact of the medium of instruction on the pupils’ performance.

Population and Sample

The research was carried out at David Livingstone Primary School, a school situated in Harare, the country's capital city. There are seven Grade 6 classes, and the learners are streamed according to their ability, with Grade 6A being the best and 6G the slowest. This study focused mainly on Grade 6A and Grade 6H learners and their teachers. Only two classes were used to enable the researchers to carry out the in-depth study they set out to conduct. However, interviews were conducted on other Grade 6 teachers as well. The idea was to gather as much information as possible from the teachers, as they are the ones who decide on the media of instruction to be used. The use of two classes whose learners have extreme abilities, that is, the polar ends also enabled the researchers to gather different data to try and understand and explain the phenomenon under study. The use of one school may be seen as a limitation of this study, however, it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the issues, unlike in a situation where the researchers may have had to divide their attention among a number of schools.

Methods of Data Collection

The researchers used three different methods of data collection so as to triangulate data collected in the study of the impact of the medium of instruction on student performance. Interviews were used to gather initial information on how teachers interpret the country's language policy, and also to find out the learners' and teachers' first languages. They were used further to establish the medium of instruction the teachers used to teach. The researchers carried out two types of interviews, that is, one on one interviews and focus group interviews. One on one
Interviews were conducted with teachers only, focus group interviews with the students.

The researchers also observed lessons in progress to see how teachers really teach, and how learners learn. Lesson observations were carried out because it is through them that the researchers could get first hand information about what is really happening in the classroom. These also enabled the researchers to learn about things the participants may be unaware of, or that they are unwilling or unable to discuss in an interview. In essence, lesson observations provided the researchers with accurate descriptions of the actual situation on the ground. The researchers made use of the non-participant observation.

Finally, the researchers analysed the teachers’ documents, that is, their mark lists. These provided the researchers with a useful and rapid overview of the situation. Also, they inevitably provided an indication of the state of development uninfluenced by either the researchers or the teachers themselves.

RESULTS
Through interviews and lesson observations the researchers were able to establish that although English is the main medium of instruction, both teachers and learners often resort to Shona. While sometimes this switch from one code to another is done unconsciously, at other times they actually make a conscious effort to switch from English to Shona. The learners often switch or mix codes when they lack enough of the English language to express themselves adequately. The teachers, on the other hand, code switch or code mix to emphasize pertinent points, or to give instructions to the learners. At other times they do this in order to explain difficult concepts to the learners. They say that doing this aides the learning process as learners understand better when concepts are explained in their own first language. They readily admit that more effective learning takes place when the medium of instruction is one that the learners are very familiar with, preferably their mother tongue. However, the researchers also learnt that this does not always aid learning. Students who have English as a first language, and Shona as their L2 said they often struggle to follow the lesson when the teacher and the rest of the class switch from English to Shona.

Perhaps, even more interestingly, the researchers discovered that code switching and code mixing are not limited to lessons that are taught in English. It emerged that even during Shona lessons the learners and their teachers often switch from Shona to English. The teachers justified this unexpected turn of events by saying that while Shona is indeed the mother tongue of the majority of their students, their Shona is deeply influenced by the English language which permeates into every aspect of the students’ lives. The Shona language often borrows words from the English language, and sometimes the learners are not even aware that the words they speak are not even Shona, but are borrowed, from English. For instance, students are more likely to say ‘rice’ as opposed to ‘mupunga’, which is the correct term in Shona. Likewise, during a Shona lesson, if the teacher talks about ‘mupunga’, she is more likely to be met with blank stares as the learners would not know what it is that she is talking about because they are more familiar with ‘rice’ than they are with ‘mupunga’.

The major aim of this study was to assess the impact of the medium of instruction on the performance of learners at David Livingstone Primary School. What emerged was that while the Grade 6A class generally performs very well in all subjects across the curriculum, they invariably do better in Shona than in the other three subjects, that is, Content, English and Maths. The researchers also discovered that their worst performance is without doubt in Content. A closer analysis of this trend led the researchers to conclude that this can be attributed to the fact that Content is by far the most complicated subject of the four in the school curriculum. It is also very broad, encompassing Religious and Moral Education, Science, Life Skills Education and Social Studies. Furthermore, Content is rather very technical, and the concepts contained therein are generally high order, and require a highly developed linguistic ability to understand them enough to internalise them.

The Grade 6G class is rather very slow. The students generally struggle, particularly with Content. However, their performance in Shona is by far the best, much better than their performance in the other three subjects offered. The medium of instruction used to teach Shona is Shona, which is also the home language of almost all the learners in this class. However, the other subjects are taught in English, a language which the learners struggle with. When the concepts being taught are difficult or complicated, the learners invariably suffer a double yoke, that is, trying to learn new and difficult material, which is difficult enough on its own, but throwing an unfamiliar language in which to do so is quite unfair on the learners. The situation is made worse by the fact that they are naturally slow learners who need all the help they can get. The help in question comes in the form of the teacher explaining these concepts, or emphasising pertinent points in Shona, a language the learners understand better. Unfortunately, this on its own is not enough, as the learners still struggle with translating what has been explained to them in Shona into English, the language used to write these subjects.

All in all, the researchers found that the use of English as the sole medium of instruction is a disadvantage to those learners whose English is not
good. Switching codes to accommodate these learners then disadvantages learners to whom Shona is a second language. It also impacts negatively even on Shona L1 speakers whose English is not good as they have to translate the new knowledge into English as they are required to write their work in English. In the end the learners fail to do well not because they do not know the answers, but because they have not yet mastered enough of the English language with which to express themselves.

The ‘Debate’ Revisited

The results as noted brought an interesting twist to the debate, while it is true that the majority of the students do well when their mother tongue is used, i.e. Shona, there is a small number of students who are disadvantaged by the use of Shona, firstly those who use English at home and those who use other languages like Ndebele or minority languages at home. The question therefore becomes what happens to these few students if Shona in Mashonaland or Ndebele in Matabeleland is to be used as the sole medium of instruction? Can these few students be the sacrificial lambs for the greater good? It is definitely not ethical.

If mother tongue based education is to be successful, a carefully thought out model should be adopted. Instead of relying on a sole medium of instruction, a model that fosters multilingual competencies and boosts learning achievement should be adopted. Baker (2006) refers to such models as the strong additive bilingual model; these aim for a high proficiency in both the first and the second languages (and perhaps more languages). Currently Zimbabwe uses subtractive bilingualism, where the mother tongue is used together with English as a medium of instruction only up to Grade 3, after which English becomes the sole medium of instruction. The 2006 Amendment of the Education Act tries to address this problem by allowing the bilingual medium of instruction up to Grade 7. But this is not enough because the Grade 7 exams are still in English with the exception of the local languages exams. Additive bilingualism should be the way to go for Zimbabweans, where mother tongue education is offered throughout primary and secondary school. Here learners are taught throughout the curriculum in the mother tongue and learn additional languages from specialized language teachers. Heugh (2006) gives an example of Afrikaans speakers in South Africa who attend only one lesson a day in English and have become very proficient in English. This model, if adopted, will undoubtedly go a long way in improving the students’ results and in turn this will contribute to the development of the nation. An education system that respects and promotes multilingualism is critical for the maintenance of a tolerant and peace-loving nation.

However, the stumbling block in the adoption of this model as has been noted before is not lack of resources or any other commonly cited reasons, but the major challenge lies in Africa’s history of triple jeopardy in the cast of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. This degree of plunder cannot be exorcised overnight. The colonial mentality is the worst enemy. Most parents would emphatically reject the idea of their children using the local languages for learning. The disheartening fact is that African leaders also suffer from this mentality. Most leaders are not interested in local languages; this is reflected in the policies that favour European languages.

The other problem is that Africans lack linguistic nationalism. Most Africans according to Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) are nationalistic about their race and often their land but nationalism about African languages is relatively weak as compared with India, the Middle East or France. Africans have escaped some of the bonds of colonialism but they are not compelled to fight for their languages. They attribute this lack of nationalism to lack of written literature that can be classified as “sacred” scripture. Linguistic nationalism among the Arabs was influenced by the Holy Book, the Qur’an as well as by the Great Arab Books of the past. There is need therefore to consciencise the masses on the importance of the local languages and ‘decolonize the mind’ if the local languages are to be used as media of instruction or else this will remain a pipe dream. But one has to note that this cannot be an overnight achievement but will take time and a lot of commitment. The key factor is for the masses to understand that their languages are in no way inferior to the European languages. The introduction of the indigenous languages should also be gradual to allow for development of materials as noted earlier.

CONCLUSION

This paper, it is hoped, will be an awakening call for the policy makers, and also raise debate among scholars about this important issue of medium of instruction in learning, a debate which will hopefully culminate in the adoption of a language policy that accommodates students from various linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, as the nation is currently trying to come up with a supreme law, that is, a new constitution, the language question has once again come under the spot light. Thus, the choice of language medium has once again become the centre of the educational reform debate. It is hoped that this research will inform this debate as it questions the current practices.

Finally, education is a basic human right, and the second of the eight United Nations Millennium Development goals. It would, thus, be unfair that in this day and age, if most or some of the country's
learners are excluded from attaining greater educational heights on the basis that they have not been able to grasp enough of the medium of instruction with which to express themselves in an examination.

REFERENCES


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