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RESEARCH REPORT

THE TEACHING OF SHONA THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF SHONA AND ENGLISH IN HIGH SCHOOLS AND AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

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THE ROLE OF national languages in nation-building is not a new issue and in Africa there has been widespread recognition of the need to consolidate political independence with linguistic independence. The Inter-African Bureau of Languages, which is accountable to the Organization of African Unity, has claimed that there are several advantages in using the mother-tongue as a medium of instruction: the development of critical powers, the fostering of effective communication, the enhancement of deeper cultural understanding and the increasing of national consciousness (Walusimbi, 1984).

Nevertheless, in Zimbabwe there is no clear language policy although the importance of the subject was emphasized by Ngara (1982, 9), quoting from the *Bulletin of the Survey of Language Use and Language Teaching in Eastern Africa* (1967):

> To embark upon a program of national development without careful consideration of the languages used in a nation is to invite an incalculable waste of vital resources simply through the compounding of everyday inefficiencies in communication. Even more serious in the long run is the waste of human potential that occurs when children are subjected to ill-conceived and inadequate language instruction during their school years.

There is no national language policy to encourage and harmonize language development. In spite of this the Ministry of Education established the Curriculum Development Unit for the continuous development of formal educational curricula. The Unit has Education Officers in charge of the promotion of the use of Shona and English (and Ndebele) in primary and secondary schools. Their efforts are complemented by Education Officers in charge of the teaching of Shona in the various regions (determined by the Ministry of Education) of the country. Also, at the University of Zimbabwe, the Departments of African

Languages and Literature, Linguistics, Curriculum Studies, and Teacher Education participate in the promotion of African languages through research and by offering courses leading to academic and professional qualifications.

The task is an uphill one because of the negative effects of the colonial education system which marginalized Shona by making English the official language. English was the medium of instruction of all subjects, except Shona itself, in primary and secondary schools and at the University. Students associated Shona with unemployment and English with employment. They often mistook the medium of instruction in English for the content; English language proficiency was mistaken for intellectual competency. Colonial condescension demotivated both students and staff. Many concepts which were met with in English tended to be expressed in the English language, an example of code-switching which discouraged exploration of concepts in the mother tongue. Sometimes, insufficient mastery of English led to rote learning (Cole *et al*., 1971). As rote learning is the lowest level of learning, material learned in such a way is not easily transferable to other situations in life.

Macnamara (1966) in his study of bilingualism observes that learning takes longer in a foreign language than in a mother tongue. According to this argument the right medium of instruction in terms of ensuring understanding and transfer of knowledge would be Shona.

Some headway is being made in spite of these difficulties, as observed by Chimhundu (1984). Unesco and Norad (the Norwegian International Development Agency) have sponsored many national and international conferences in which research and networking have been encouraged in order to centralize efforts in promoting a more efficient use of national languages. It is from resolutions of the 1986 Linguistics Association for SADDC Universities (LASU) conference that this report was conceived. Dr H. Chimhundu and Mr J. Zondo, linguists from the University of Zimbabwe, and other conference participants embarked on a research project to find ways and means of promoting the use of African Languages in mass media, commerce and industry and in education.

SCOPE

This report focuses on Shona because Shona is the mother tongue of both researchers. As the report is aimed at arriving at practical solutions to problems, we felt it was prudent to confine ourselves to a language in which we are linguistically competent. In addition, we have both gone through the type of high-school and university programmes which are being analysed, which gives us an inside picture of the area we are studying. We have both taught at school and university levels.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Shona is one of the two major indigenous languages in Zimbabwe, spoken by the majority of the population, that is, 5 293 000 (67 per cent) out of a population of 7,9 million (Unesco, 1985, 75).

An official language is one that is used in government, commerce and industry. A national language is a language that has been accorded that status by the government. In Zimbabwe, English, Shona and Ndebele are national languages.

Traditionally the term 'high school' means a school which teaches up to the level of the Higher School Certificate ('A' level), which is the normal entry requirement to the University of Zimbabwe. Since Independence the term has been somewhat relaxed to include schools which teach up to the level of the General Certificate of Education ('O' level) only.

The African Languages and Literature Department is a department of the University of Zimbabwe which offers degree courses in Shona and Ndebele. Shona was offered for the first time in 1963 and Ndebele in 1968.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TEACHING OF SHONA IN HIGH SCHOOLS IN ZIMBABWE

Initially Shona was taught in schools in both Shona and English. Shona was first offered as an examinable subject for first-language speakers by the Cambridge Examining Syndicate in 1957 and by the Associated Examining Board for Shona second-language speakers in 1964. The subject was first offered by the Cambridge Examining Syndicate at Advanced level in 1977. There are three papers at 'A' level, as follows:

Paper I: Composition (*Rondedzero*), Comprehension (*Nzwisiso*) and Summary (*Pfupikiso*).
Paper II: Language Usage and Appreciation.
Paper III: Traditional and Modern Shona Literature.

The questions in Paper I must be answered in Shona but the questions in Papers II and III can be answered in either English or Shona.

There has been a move towards minimizing the use of English in both teaching and examination answers since the attainment of Independence in 1980. This has not been easy in practice because some of the language and literature books used to prepare for Papers II and III are largely in English and in some cases are actually designed for the study of English. Fortune's *Shona Grammatical Constructions* (Fortune, 1981) was the only source for the language course component until a supplementary work *Jekesa Pfungwa* (Masocha, Kuona and Gumbo, 1985) was written. The problem of reference books is further compounded by the problem of Shona–English bilingualism. There is a tendency for people to have difficulty in expressing themselves in Shona when discussing ideas and concepts which they learned in English. Bilingual people then tend to switch from one language to the other. This tendency is most marked among teachers who are teaching Shona through the medium of Shona.

This tendency of bilingual speakers, coupled with colonial attitudes towards language, could give an impression that indigenous languages have no vocabulary for certain concepts. To some extent this is true but the degree of truth can be determined only through research because the educated have been culturally denied continuous active academic use of the Shona language because they learned it in English.

University graduates who teach Shona will have received most of their instruction in English at the University. When they start teaching, they are expected by the authorities and the students alike to teach Shona totally in Shona. This is even more difficult for underqualified teachers or teachers of

other disciplines who are asked to teach Shona just because they happen to be first-language Shona speakers. This has been noted by Ngara (1982) and by Chimhundu (1984, 15), who says:

> Those Africans who have made it have absorbed a lot on culture in the medium of English and their Shona has been left behind in the village. They will boast of their African culture but will do nothing to promote it, besides perhaps buying a few artefacts, books and records or cassettes for display only.

The effect of this situation led the Shona Language Committee of the Ministry of Education to consider setting up machinery to remedy the lack of literary and linguistic terms. In practical terms not much appears to have been done by the Committee. Many scholars are of the opinion that a living national language could be promoted more easily if the government had a clearly defined language policy.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

In carrying out this research, questionnaires and structured interviews were used. Firstly, a questionnaire was distributed to 143 first-year African Languages students during the first week of their first term at the University. These students were representative of 41 high schools, both rural and urban. The questions were centred mainly on students' learning experiences of Shona at high school with reference to the medium of instruction. There were also questions on the students' general attitude to the Shona language. This sample of students was chosen on the basis that since they had shown an interest in the subject by electing to study it at University level, they were likely to give more genuine information concerning their experience than those students still in high school.

Secondly, structured interviews based partly on students' responses (to be used for checking with students' responses) were carried out with 25 Shona teachers in high schools and lecturing staff in the Departments of African Languages and Literature, Linguistics, and Curriculum Studies at the University of Zimbabwe. In order to create an informal and hence relaxed atmosphere conducive to freer impartation of information, the order of questions was not strictly adhered to. The interviews with high-school teachers focused on their experiences in using Shona in teaching Shona, especially their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of teaching in Shona. The interviews also covered questions on the attitude of students towards the use of Shona and on the language in which they encouraged students to write when there was a choice. Interviews with the University lecturing staff centred on the medium of Shona instruction at the University and its implications.

DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED

There was no difficulty obtaining the questionnaire returns from the students as they were in the department in which both researchers were working. The students were quite enthusiastic about the questionnaire, possibly because they thought that the information which they gave would enable lecturers to assist them more in their studies. Thus all questionnaire returns were obtained within the same week in which they were distributed. One problem, however, was that

some students did not answer all the questions, probably because they failed to understand them. Nevertheless, this failure to answer all the questions was considered negligible as there were at least 133 out of 143 responses for any one question.

The major problem experienced in interviewing teachers in High Schools was to find sufficient time when they could be interviewed as their schedules were generally very tight. Most of them were, however, kind enough to give their students work to do while they themselves were being interviewed. They were very co-operative, as they considered the survey of considerable significance to their work. Generally no significant problems were experienced with the interviews with the University lecturing staff.

FINDINGS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Student questionnaire

Results of this questionnaire have been tabulated (Tables I–IX). Table X is a summary and overview of the results. The results show that there is a general tendency to use both Shona and English as media for teaching and learning Shona in High School. There is, however, some complexity in the teaching of the Language Usage and Appreciation component of the subject. The results show that teachers use mostly English, or, to a lesser extent, both Shona and

Table I

LANGUAGE IN WHICH NON-PRESCRIBED LITERATURE IS READ

Language	*Respondents*	*%*
English only	0	0
Shona only	2	2
Both Shona and English	86	69
More Shona than English	28	22
More English than Shona	9	7
TOTAL	125	100

Table II

LANGUAGE IN WHICH SHONA WAS TAUGHT AT 'A' LEVEL

Language	*Respondents*	*%*
Shona only	16	12
English	8	6
Shona and English	108	82
TOTAL	132	100

Table III

LANGUAGE IN WHICH COMMENTS WERE MADE BY TEACHER

Language	*Respondents*	*%*
Shona only	1	1
English only	0	0
Shona and English	132	99
TOTAL	133	100

Table IV

LANGUAGE IN WHICH PRACTICAL CRITICISM AND GRAMMAR ESSAYS AND EXERCISES WERE WRITTEN

Language	*Respondents*	*%*
Shona only	72	54
English	23	17
Shona and English	38	29
TOTAL	133	100

Table V

REASONS FOR CHOICE OF LANGUAGE IN TABLE IV

Language	*Reasons*	*Respondents*	*%*
Shona	Higher proficiency in Shona	59	82
	Shona is richer and more precise	3	4
	To avoid interference	2	3
	Personal preference	8	11
	TOTAL	72	100
English	Teacher's recommendation	4	17
	English is richer and more precise	3	13
	Higher proficiency in English	16	70
	TOTAL	23	100
Shona and English	English has literary and linguistic teminology which Shona largely does not have. The two therefore supplement each other	38	100
	TOTAL	38	100

Table VI

LANGUAGE USED FOR TEACHING PRACTICAL CRITICISM AND GRAMMAR

Language	*Respondents*	*%*	*Problems*
Shona only	20	14	Lack of literary and linguistic terminology
English only	72	50	Generally low proficiency leading to problems of expression
Shona and English	51	36	Nil
TOTAL	143	100	

Table VII

LANGUAGE PREFERRED WHEN LEARNING SHONA AT UNIVERSITY

Language	*Respondents*	*%*	*Reasons*
Shona only	103	76	More proficient Would like to increase proficiency Cultural preservation
English only	22	16	More proficient Availability of literary and linguistic terminology More standard othography Precise and clear
Both English and Shona	11	8	Prefer to use language used by lecturer Prefer to use either language depending on the question
TOTAL	136	100	

Table VIII

PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED IN WRITING LITERATURE ESSAYS IN SHONA

Responses	*Respondents*	*%*	*Problems experienced (in order of frequency)*
Yes	28	21	Being analytical Expression poor Lack of adequate linguistic and literary terminology in Shona
No	104	79	
TOTAL	132	100	

Table IX

WHETHER THE LEARNING OF SHONA IN SHONA WAS AN ENJOYABLE EXPERIENCE

Reponses	*Respondents*	*%*	*Reasons for not enjoying learning Shona in Shona (in order of frequency)*
Yes	122	92	
No	10	8	Terminology problems Shona not clear Teacher's failure to express himself clearly Poor expression
TOTAL	132	100	

Table X

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM QUESTIONNAIRE

		Language used (%)		
		Shona	*English*	*Both*
1	Language in which non-prescribed literature is read	2	0	69
2	Language in which Shona was taught at 'A' level	12	6	82
3	Language in which comments were made by the teacher	1	0	99
4	Language in which practical criticism and grammar essays and exercises were written	54	17	29
5	Language in which practical criticism and grammar were taught	14	50	36
6	Language preferred to be used as medium of learning Shona at the University	76	16	8

English, while students prefer to use Shona in writing essays and exercises in this course. One major reason why many students preferred Shona was that they were more proficient in Shona than in English. However, others thought that English has the linguistic and literary terminology necessary for writing Language Usage and Appreciation essays and exercises, and so preferred, when given the choice, to use English. Others used either language, depending on the topic given.

On the question of which medium they preferred to use at University, the majority chose Shona. It should be noted, however, that it was in English that most of these respondents chose to write their first literature essay at University.

Interviews with high-school teachers

Medium of instruction

The majority of the teachers interviewed confirmed students' responses that they use both Shona and English in teaching according to content, that is, they generally use Shona only when teaching Shona literature, a mixture of English and Shona when teaching literary terminology and English when teaching Language Usage and Appreciation. There were, however, a few others who said that they use Shona only. These teachers said that they overcome the problems of terminology through the creation of linguistic and literary terminology by phonologizing and coinage.

Advantages of using Shona

The following is a random list of what teachers generally considered to be the advantages of using Shona as a medium of instruction for the teaching of Shona:

- the language becomes living, that is, students can actually see the language in wider use;
- some topics are better discussed in Shona, for example, topics on cultural studies;
- using Shona encourages assimilation of English terms into Shona;
- examples can easily be given in context;
- it fosters and ensures understanding (if the teacher is proficient);
- it encourages discovery and exploitation of the richness of the language;
- it has greater impact because of the absence of communication barriers;
- students experience fewer problems of expression in writing;
- rote learning can be avoided because students understand more; and
- students become creative as they have to improvise and create terminology to use in writing their essays.

These responses confirm those of the students that students are more proficient in Shona than in English and, therefore, use Shona more in writing.

Disadvantages of using Shona

Teachers' responses on the disadvantages of using Shona in teaching reflect students' responses that teachers tend to use mostly English in the teaching of Language Usage and Appreciation. The following is a random list of their responses:

- there is no standard academic register for Shona;
- students are accustomed to using ready-made material and are not very creative;
- English terms are used in designing examination questions and so students are disadvantaged if they remain ignorant of them;
- there is limited literary and linguistic terminology in Shona;
- there is a general lack of interest in learning the Shona subject, probably owing to the colonial attitude to the language and psychological problems experienced by a people who for many generations have been made to feel that their language is inferior to English;

- high-school teachers are trained in English at the University and do not question the rationale behind it;
- the Ministry of Education has done nothing to encourage teachers to use Shona: for example, there are no official circulars in Shona concerning terminology, syllabuses, or marking schemes and official discussions are conducted in English;
- there is no Shona grammar written in Shona and no texts on literary criticism in Shona;
- existing literary and linguistic terminology is not standardized; and
- there is a lack of training in translation and so teachers find it difficult to translate English terminology into Shona.

Students' attitude

On the question of students' attitude, some teachers thought that the students' attitude depended to a large extent on the teacher's attitude towards the subject and his or her level of competency in teaching the subject. Others thought that students tended to give Shona less study-time than other subjects, showing that they thought it was either an easy subject or a not very important one. A few other teachers thought that students liked the subject and were quite happy with it.

Generally all teachers thought that multiracial (mainly urban) schools had greater attitude problems towards the language (maybe because of the social environment) leading perhaps to a lack of interest in and a poorer command of the language. These teachers tended to prefer the use of English for teaching and learning. On the other hand, non-multiracial schools (rural and high-density suburbs) had a more positive attitude towards the language and therefore a better command of and more interest in learning Shona in Shona.

Language encouraged for written communication

The majority of the teachers responded that they encouraged students to write in Shona, thus confirming students' responses that they used mostly Shona for writing essays and exercises. There were, however, a few who said that, when teaching Language Usage and Appreciation, they told students to use either language, depending on which one they felt comfortable with in answering a particular question. There was a consensus that students wrote better essays in Shona: they expressed themselves better and made fewer grammatical mistakes.

In considering possible solutions to the problems raised, one notes that while English has been maintained in the classroom for the convenience of the teachers, some teachers have felt that this could be taken negatively by students and adversely affect their attitudes. Borrowing English literary and linguistic terms should be encouraged only when it is essential. Neologisms should not be introduced without careful research first. Research should be aimed at finding existing terms from all people who use the language. The formally educated and traditional language experts who are familiar with Shona rhetoric should be interviewed. On the other hand, country people, according to some scholars, are better repositories of Shona terms than beneficiaries of formal education.

Some teachers did not feel confident in their use of Shona expressions and they argued that they use English in order to explain themselves better. Some teachers felt that students pretend not to know Shona. Yet others felt that one

achieves greater clarity when teaching the Shona subject in the medium of Shona. This, as already noted, was specially felt to be so in cultural studies. It was generally agreed that composition could also be taught easily in the medium of Shona. The problem of teaching language usage is aggravated by the regional diversity of linguistic terms as each region has tried to evolve its own terms. Improvisation is commendable but at some point there is a need to harmonize the results for examination purposes. Teaching Shona in Shona encourages teachers and students alike to be creative. New terms are coined at grassroots level and a diversity of terms gives people choices and synonyms. It helps to combat the dependency syndrome and the 'foreign is better' attitude engendered by colonialism. It also helps to develop an academic register.

Another problem is that of inertia. Students learn in English or Shona without being told the rationale behind the practice. They then carry on the practice without thinking about it. Some educationalists felt that the Ministry of Education could assist in changing negative attitudes by circulating lists of literary terms in Shona; by having syllabuses and marking schemes in Shona; by encouraging examiners to set examination questions in Shona rather than mixing the two languages as is usually the case at present in Papers II and III; by encouraging translation of English works into Shona; by removing the option to answer questions in English; and by introducing translation courses in teacher training.

Interviews with University lecturers

The University's official medium of instruction is English. Traditionally the Departments of African Languages and Literature and of Curriculum Studies (Shona section) have used English as a medium of instruction. Essays are normally written in English but students have the option to write in Shona. This does not appear to have conflicted with the academic goals of the University. Shona is taught to promote national consciousness; it is also taught as part of the general pursuance of academic rigour and excellence. Undergraduates are trained to apply knowledge to any situation in life, teaching included. The training of the graduate to become a fully-fledged teacher is the responsibility of the Curriculum Studies Department.

Some academics argue that it does not matter in what language teaching is done. Independent and creative thinkers can be created through the medium of either language. One academic observed that English could have the advantage because it has developed an academic register. Academic rigour implies looking at the medium as well as the content. The choice of English rather than Shona is thus a pragmatic decision. One interviewee felt that, while it is a disadvantage for students to look at their language through foreign spectacles, the foreign perspective can afford students an objective analysis of their own language, enabling them to see themselves from the viewpoint of the outsider. Objectivity is an academic virtue. It was also argued that if true learning does take place students should be able to extend themselves to meet the demands of teaching in high schools. Moreover, when they have chosen teaching as a career they have to go through professional training in teaching (which is conducted in English). However, there is need to balance idealism and realism. Academic rigour should be balanced with practicality. This is the best way of achieving a balanced perception of the problem.

The majority of academics interviewed agreed that the introduction of Shona as the medium of instruction in teaching Shona is essential. Some believe that it should start in primary and secondary schools and be introduced gradually at the University. This would encourage grassroots participation in the creation of terms and of linguistic and literary registers. University courses require material such as a Shona–Shona dictionary, literature in Shona and experienced teaching staff, all of which are not easily available at present. While Shona is being taught at primary and secondary schools the Departments of African Languages and Literature, Linguistics, and Curriculum Studies at the University could concentrate on research with the help of students and colleagues of related departments so as to bring out the richness of the language.

It is difficult to achieve academic rigour in the face of so many problems. Problems of comprehension impede the easy instruction of students of Shona in Shona as well as in English. Both teachers and students need to acquire an academic register in both languages in order to achieve academic excellence.

Teaching Shona courses in both languages is not uncommon in lecture-rooms. This again is a pragmatic decision. Certain issues need to be introduced in Shona and then evaluated in English. Essential and plausible as this practice may be, it could undermine the image of the national language in the minds of students. It could give the impression that serious discussion cannot be carried out in Shona. English is then taken as being academically deeper. This is particularly so where, as was observed to be the case in some lectures, jokes are cracked in Shona and serious content delivered in English. This gives the impression that Shona is good only for humour and is, therefore, incapable of being the medium of formal instruction. One lecturer observed that, in such a situation, whenever English is used students take notes and whenever Shona is used students stop taking notes. English is equated with course content and Shona with digressions from content. It was observed, however, that in discussion students are more confident when speaking in Shona than in English.

One academic felt that it is possible to teach Shona through the medium of Shona. New terms can always be brought in when necessary through either code-switching or phonologizing the English terms into Shona. The problems one faces when teaching in Shona are typical problems of adaptation which fall away through hard work. In Lesotho, Nigeria and Tanzania language courses are taught in the respective national languages. The cases of Swahili in Tanzania and Hausa and Igbo in Nigeria show that, given the right attitudes and approaches, it is possible to use the indigenous tongue for instruction.

CONCLUSION

Much has been done but a great deal more still needs to be done. The work done so far needs to be supported by research in the creation and standardization of terms. Alongside these efforts research could be conducted in using Shona for operational efficiency in industry, the media, commerce, essential services and community work. Without research guidance valuable efforts can be misguided. Research could also be expedited if there were a national languages policy.

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