

## THE ROLE OF THE PRIMARY LANGUAGE IN THE BILINGUAL-BICULTURAL EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE

\*MUNHUWEYI PERESUH AND \*\*JESTA MASUKU

\*Faculty of Education, University of Zimbabwe

\*\*Masvingo University College (University of Zimbabwe)

### Abstract

*The article addresses the question of integrating primary languages into the education systems within bilingual and bicultural settings. It reviews studies undertaken to promote the student's home language and culture in bilingual and bicultural education systems. The policies and possibilities in the Zimbabwean system are examined. The article argues that for a child to be identified with the entire education process, the role played by the child's native culture and language and that of the native language teacher should not be underplayed. It concludes that a synthesis of all the elements of the child's home language and culture equips the child with strong and deep skills that the child will require in operating in a multi-lingual-cultural environment.*

### INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe is a former British colony that became independent in 1980. Missionaries of European descent and the government gradually got involved in the policy and financing of education. The country has two major socio-linguistic groups, namely, Shona and Ndebele speakers, constituting more than 70% and more than 15% of the population, respectively. There are also several indigenous minority linguistic groups such as the Venda, Tonga, Kalanga, Ndau, and Sotho, which constitute slightly over 12% of the population. However, English, the home language of less than 1% of the population, is the official medium of instruction in the country's educational system from the fourth year of elementary school to the university. Indigenous languages have been marginalised as a matter of policy in preference to English. English is also the medium of communication in all official communications in the country.

Historically, educational systems worldwide have largely been monolingual, in favour of languages of the elite (Gfeller and Robinson, 1998). Research has amply demonstrated the superiority of the mother tongue (L1) to the second language (L2) as the medium of instruction for the subjects of the school curriculum. In Zimbabwe, the report of the National Language Policy Advisory Panel (NLPAP) (1998) pointed out the need to upgrade the status of the previously marginalised African

Languages as media of instruction especially in the elementary stages of the primary school (*The Herald*, 27 July 1998). This shows an acceptance of the role of the mother tongue in the initial stages of concept formation and is in line with the historic UNESCO (1953) document of which is very clear in its support for indigenous languages. The UNESCO document states that

Psychologically, [the mother tongue] is a system of meaningful signs that, in [a child's] mind, works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium (1953, 17).

This demonstrates the strong role of the child's language and culture in bilingual and bicultural education at primary level in public schools. One would, therefore, expect that, in Zimbabwe's primary schools, where almost all the pupils have the same L1 which is not English, the L1 would be used as the medium of instruction so as to achieve optimal learning. Yet, this is not the case.

A significant policy change in Zimbabwe in the 1990s was the requirement to use the child's home language as the medium of instruction for the first three years of elementary school. However, for the last four years of primary school and throughout the years of secondary education until university level, English is, by policy, the only medium of instruction for all pupils. This is, in spite of the fact that most primary schools are rural and located in specific monolingual speech communities where all the pupils speak the same home language. Similarly, most urban primary schools also have children of the same home language background. It is only the few elite and exclusive primary schools that are attended by children of mixed home language backgrounds that would require a compromise common language of instruction. The policy to use English as a medium of instruction for all pupils in primary school must, therefore, have other justifications than that of the need to use a language common to all pupils.

While it has been accepted that the use of L1 in school instruction facilitates concept formation on the part of the elementary school learner and improves the quality of instruction, according to Bergman, Menicucci, McLaughlin and Woodworth (1995), this is possible depending on a variety of factors, including, the languages and cultures present in the school, the development of language strategies that are adapted to the local conditions and that address the core curriculum, fluency of the teachers in the languages, the interactive and integrative use of language in real life situations, in all areas, and on a school-wide basis, and the ability to draw on both local and regional resources.

In promoting the use of L1 in all primary schools, Zimbabwe has a distinct advantage in that its indigenous languages are already rooted in the physical environment of the local community. However, the problem is that the core school curriculum is, presently, highly centralised, elite-culture oriented, and insensitive to the cultural and linguistic concerns of the sub-cultures of the various linguistic groups. It would, therefore be necessary to rewrite and re-orientate the content and materials presently used in school, which are geared to an English language mediated imagined common culture.

A school-wide approach would be easy, as schools could use the same common language, which is L1 in their areas. Already, for the first three years of elementary school, children from Mashonaland (including its urban centres) use Shona, while children in Matebeleland and Plumtree use Ndebele and Kalanga, respectively. Similarly, those in Kariba and the surrounding areas have Tonga, while the Southern Lowveld has Venda. Teacher deployment would have to take cognisance of the linguistic abilities of the teacher *vis-à-vis* the school he/she wants to work in. The child's self-esteem, communication factors, and other issues are essential to education and can be greatly facilitated by a teacher conversant with and sympathetic to the language and culture of the child. This is an issue that has received little attention, yet it is very important.

Concerning Zimbabwe, it has been argued that promoting a common language, namely, English, is necessary in order to promote national unity, as this facilitates inter-group communication and mutual understanding. Thus, political considerations are given primacy over pedagogical issues. However, a distinction has to be drawn between learning English in order to use it as an official medium of national communication and using English as a medium of instruction. The former presupposes one does not have to learn English in English. A child can be taught English in a medium he/she best understands, namely, his/her home language. This can work even better if the teacher is fully aware of and best understands the child's culture and primary language. The latter, however, makes English fundamental and very powerful in all the school subjects studied by the child. This is the situation most Zimbabwean children find themselves in. Except for vernacular subjects, most, if not all, subjects are taught and examined in English. The power and centrality of English, obviously disadvantages the second language learner.

A variety of issues, therefore, come to the fore in the general discussion of the child's home language and culture. While these issues may seem to be distinct, they are actually intricately related and have important consequences for the education of the child who enters school speaking a language different from that of the school administration. The role of the mother language in the learning process, the empowering

nature of language and culture, and the role of teachers fluent in the child's home language and familiar with the culture, therefore, are elements of bilingual-bicultural education whose effects cannot be underestimated.

### THE ROLE OF THE PRIMARY LANGUAGE

An examination of the role of language in learning shows that the first language acts as a sort of a 'gatekeeper', i.e. a filtering and interpreting mechanism within which subsequent concepts are best developed. Davies (1991) describes the foundational nature of the primary language and its role in learning. Davies also discusses Halliday's (1978) contention that no language ever completely replaces the mother tongue. Certain kinds of ability seem to be particularly difficult to acquire in a second language. Many pupils in Zimbabwe find it difficult to distinguish between melting and dissolving, ice and snow because there are no distinguishing equivalents in their L1 languages of either Ndebele or Shona.

When a child is learning new concepts or words in the second language, he or she first searches the mother tongue 'database' for an immediate equivalent. If the primary language has not been developed well enough, such a child is likely to have problems in forming new concepts in the second language. The role of language in meaning, therefore, is a variable that depends on the context and individual situation within which the languages and their speakers are found. Studies of bilinguals reading a text in one language in which a word appears in the second language, for example, report that "when a reader knows the words of a language, he/she perceives them directly in terms of their meanings" (Freeman, 1992). This recognition that the things we learn are not restricted to one language or another and are not kept in separate parts of the brain illustrates clearly the thin line between primary language and second language use in the classroom, and reveals the *real* goal of learning, namely, the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Danesi (1990, 74) argues that "literacy development in the mother tongue constitutes the primary condition for the development of global language proficiency and for the formation of the appropriate cognitive schemes needed to classify and organise experience." This is in agreement with Zimbabwe's primary school language policy, which attempts to promote bilingual-bicultural education. In this policy, the medium of education at primary school level is in the child's home language up to Grade 3.<sup>1</sup> As of the year 2002, only Shona and Ndebele have been made the two dominant languages at primary school level, while attempts to

---

1. Third year of primary school education (8 years old).

include other minority languages are still in infancy. The primary language is used so that the child gets the opportunity to learn the basic concepts in his own language and to give him freedom to express himself without the inhibitions imposed by an insufficient mastery of the medium of instruction. It is hoped that the child will use his primary linguistic skills in acquiring the second language.

Some studies "indicate that bilingual children perform better than monolinguals on tests of linguistic skills, divergent thinking, sensitivity to communication, and general intelligence" (Lessow-Hurley, 1990, 56). Others support the "Common Underlying Proficiency model of language learning which assumes that skills and concepts learned in one language transfer to another" (Lessow-Hurley, 1960, 60). Such skills are: "directionality, sequencing, and the ability to distinguish among shapes and sounds" (Lessow-Hurle, 1990, 61). All these skills are extremely important in the learning environment, in general, and in the school classroom, specifically.

Related to this is the recognition that "bilingual people have a strong understanding of the arbitrary nature of the symbols of language, which enhances their problem-solving skills" (Lessow-Hurley, 1990, 24). Lessow-Hurley (1990) further argues that a normal child enters kindergarten with an adequate vocabulary and an excellent grasp of syntax in his/her mother tongue. This, he argues, provides the foundation for the language and literacy development that will follow in school. This provides a strong rationale for providing primary language instruction in the early grades, for it is logical to begin early skill instruction in that language, building on the conceptual and linguistic framework the child brings to school (Lessow-Hurley, 1990).

Additionally, the manner in which one learns first and second languages is important, for as Davies (1991) points out, native speakers often move from a position of insecurity to one of security, while non-native speakers move in the reverse direction. Native speakers, however defined, start off seeking meaning: they learn the language offered them in order, in part, to gain the meaning they seek. As they progress, the gain in meaning gives them greater and greater security as they come, through the medium of language, to control their environment.

Similarly, in discussing the prerequisites for academic success, in a second language, for students who know their first languages well, Freeman (1992) maintains that success is based on three prerequisites, namely, that content instruction in the first language is maintained, that concept development in the first language is more effective and is more easily transferred to the second language, and that a strong first language eases second language learning. This is evident in studies that show faster learning of a third language among students who have developed literacy

in their first languages. It barely needs to be restated that people approach language learning using the information and abilities they already have, though it is not always recognised that errors by second language learners are evidence of a creative cognitive strategy for solving the new language problem (Lessow-Hurley, 1990). The above discussion suggests that education systems in bilingual/multicultural societies can no longer afford to neglect the learners' L1 and home culture.

The issue of what language to use in schools is politically problematical in former colonies especially since "a choice may redistribute power in a global context as well as within an African country, between the elite and the masses" (Brock-Utne, 1993, 9). In most African states, including Zimbabwe, the official language is the language of the minority as opposed to home languages spoken by the majority. To determine whether initial primary education should take place in the child's home language or the school language, Dutcher (1982) argues that the cognitive and linguistic development of the child in the first language, attitudes and support of parents, and the status of the languages involved within the community (especially the non-school language), should be considered. These factors are important in any consideration of bilingual-bicultural education, especially for second ('school') language instruction. If these criteria are not met, initial instruction should be conducted in the first language.

Equally important for the success of any language in education, especially in bilingual-bicultural situations, is the parents' attitudes to language use. Where parent's support for local languages is low, as seems to be the case in Zimbabwe, the state may be reluctant to insist on their use in schools. In Zimbabwe, the parents' attitude to L1 is very poor in most of the cases. They think English paves way for employment. For most parents in Zimbabwe, education is equated to the thorough knowledge and proficient use of English. The pedagogical implications of gaining access to the second language, via the primary language, may not make any sense to many. Trying to convince a parent that "bilingual education is the best route to full English proficiency is like trying to convince somebody that the best way to go west is to go east first" (Brock-Utne, 1993, 32). It is common practice, therefore, for parents to encourage their children to use English in their day to day activities. This has had a negative impact on the primary languages, as will be indicated later in this article.

The view argued so far is that the primary language must be developed and used in the initial instruction stages until the official language, which is the second language, is thoroughly mastered. This will be done so that linguistic problems do not interfere with concept acquisition and development.

## SOCIO-LINGUISTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE USE OF THE HOME LANGUAGES IN SCHOOL

It is not always that the child's home language and home culture are recognised and implemented in the overall planning of the education of the child. This is normally the case where other 'minority' languages exist. Zimbabwe is one such nation, which has not yet accommodated all the minority languages in its educational system. Presently, the government policy is that some minority languages like Venda, Tonga, Kalanga, Shangani, and Nambya should be taught for three years of primary education in areas where they are predominant. This has largely been because most of the languages have not yet developed written materials for use as instruction materials in school.

In addition, no teacher training programmes have been designed for their inclusion. For this reason, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers are often simply unaware of the many factors which play a role in the education of a child from a cultural and linguistic background different from the large school culture. Many teachers have specialised in teaching this language in an intensive, immersion style that has not allowed them to examine and understand the language and cultural background of their students, who may come from a myriad of backgrounds. They, therefore, do not take into account the rich background and foundational element upon which they can build when developing plans and addressing the student's needs. To remedy this, Danesi (1990, 13) suggests "gradual integration" and the "preservation and reinforcement of the pupil's cultural identity".

Also important are the attitudes of teachers and the community to language use. As noted, many parents want their children to focus only on the school language because of its perceived high status in society. Teachers, monolingual administrators, and parents, who do not understand the deep foundational nature of the first language, often do not realise the strong force that empowering students with a sense of pride and identity in their native languages and cultures wield in education. The lack of pride in the Zimbabwean children's primary languages and culture has resulted in the poor performance in Shona and Ndebele Grade 7 examinations in most Zimbabwean schools;<sup>2</sup> the main reason being that schools expect the children to use English when at school, while, at home, parents equally encourage them to use English.

---

2. A school leaving examination taken in the seventh year of primary school education.

## THE ROLE OF THE PRIMARY-LANGUAGE SPEAKING TEACHER

As a way of approaching the task of recognising the force of the child's language and culture, fluency in the student's primary language by a teacher is essential for effective learning. This should not only be for the obvious benefits in communication, but also for the positive image of the students' home languages and cultures which such a teacher can convey. Such an understanding is attained from recognition of the foundational nature of the home language and an appreciation of language and culture's potency for empowering pupils politically and otherwise. Indeed, when students see their home language and culture being valued in school, they form more positive attitudes towards learning in general. After listing benefits to teachers' positive attitudes towards the students of primary language, as seen in a variety of programmes, Freeman (1992, 203) concludes, "teachers who support their students' bilingualism are teaching to the strengths of the whole child". Especially important is the recognition that:

a culturally responsive classroom must reach beyond surface or artifact culture and attend to the basic differences in the way children from different backgrounds understand, communicate, and learn. Teachers must understand the nature of the culture, its relationship to language, and the relationship of specific cultures to the culture of . . . schools (Lessow-Hurley, 1990, 3).

For a teacher to operate well in a bilingual-bicultural educational system, ideally, that teacher should be bilingual. If primary languages are to become truly effective tools for expressing national culture, the training of primary language teachers should be treated as a matter of great importance. Such training programmes should be able to incorporate some of the minority languages in Zimbabwe. The integration of minority language teachers in schools is very crucial, especially in inter-cultural education where teachers are expected to operate on the same level and in perfect cooperation. Such teachers create links between the school and minority parents, and introduce the minority culture as content into the curriculum (Byram, 1990).

It is also worth noting that maintaining fluency in the students' native languages depends strongly upon a teacher's understanding of the child's home language and culture. Teachers should teach from the students' experiences, provide a strong context for the understanding of the issues students face, emphasise critical thinking, validate the students' own cultural experiences, and explore both cultural differences and human universals. Incorporating local folklore into the school's curriculum is one way of making it more culture-conscious. However,

the main problem in our classrooms today is that the teachers seem to be unaware of the wealth of examples that could be taken from African folklore to enrich the teaching of their subjects. Consequently, their teaching is often divorced from the pupils' cultural experiences (Ndawi and Masuku, 1998, 14).

Above all, a teacher's understanding of the flexibility of a bilingual child's thinking should guide learning and teaching.

### TOWARD A SYNTHESIS OF THEORY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Recent studies show how the home language and culture of a child in a bilingual-bicultural situation builds upon all the resources available to the child. However, such a perspective is not without problems and controversy. One way of going round the hurdles associated with this approach is to adopt a "Framework of Intervention", as proposed by Cummins (1989) which, if implemented, can benefit *all* students. The proposed framework includes high expectations of students, prioritising the education of such students, staff development, offering a variety of classes to students, bilingual counselling, encouraging parents involvement, and a strong commitment by staff (Freeman, 1992).

One of the ways of planning, analysing and assessing bilingual-bicultural education is through the examination of a number of "quality indicators", elements which are present in situations where high quality results are achieved. A number of these have been outlined by Bergman *et. al.* (1995). Those that relate specifically to the role of the child's primary language and culture in the education process have already been highlighted above in order to promote better understanding of, and to encourage building upon this important foundation asset for more effective teaching and learning. These indicators require a high level of interaction and cooperation among the teachers, parents and administrators; indeed, all who become involved work together in a positive manner which endeavours to respect, support and build upon the students' first (home) language and culture. This cooperation not only facilitates the implementation and success of the school's goals and plans, but also prepares the children to become emerging citizens in a multicultural world, first, within the school and, later, in the wider world of their neighbourhoods, cities, states, and countries. By virtue of their multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds, they are, without choosing or being chosen, mediators, gatekeepers and travellers, at the very minimum, of the "border" between any two cultures and languages of which they have knowledge.

Through the understanding of theories of cognitive development and the role of the child's first language, practical application of such theory,

as in the Foyer model and others (such as those reviewed by Dutcher, 1982), and continued research and application to classrooms and specific situations, a synthesis of all elements of the child's home language and culture can be achieved which would make bilingual-bicultural education effective. By learning in a very active manner their own cultures and languages, in conjunction with other learning which transpires in any school, children are assured of achieving the strong and deep rooted skills which they will need to mediate in a multicultural environment.

### CONCLUSION

Curricula are generally accused of inertia and of lagging behind the dictates of progressive discoveries made in educational research. In Zimbabwe, the issue of the use of the pupils' home languages as the primary medium of instruction is one such example. There is some confusion between the learning of English for use as a national language of communication, and its role as an effective medium of instruction for all other school subjects and at all levels of education. The effectiveness of the pupils' home languages as media of instruction, especially in the primary school, as this article has argued, can not be doubted. It is thus being argued here that countries, including Zimbabwe, whose native languages are not English should reconsider their present strategies, which emphasise English as a medium of instruction in schools at the expense of their own languages.

### References

- BERGMAN, C.; MENICUCCI, B.; MCLAUGHLIN, AND WOODWORTH, K. (1995) *School Reform and Student Diversity: Case Studies of Exemplary Practices for LEP Students* (Washington, DC., National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education).
- BROCK-UTNE, B. (1993) "Education in Africa: Education for self-reliance or recolonization?", in *Rapport*, 4.
- BYRAM, M. AND LEMAN, J. (eds.) (1990) *Bicultural and Bilingual Education: The Foyer Model in Brussels* (Clevedon, Multilingual Matters).
- CUMMINS, J. (1989) "Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children", in *Review of Educational Research*, 49, (ii), 222-51.
- DANESI, M. (1990) "Mother tongue literacy and the 'shaping' of knowledge: The experience of Italian children", in Byram, M. and Leman, J. (eds) *Bicultural and Bilingual Education: The Foyer Model in Brussels* (Clevedon, Multilingual Matters).
- DAVIES, A. (1991) *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press).

- DUTCHER, N. (1982) *The Use of First and Second Languages in Primary Education: Selected Case Studies* (Washington, DC., World Bank).
- FREEMAN, Y. S. (1992) *Whole Language of Second Language Learners* (Portsmouth, Heinemann).
- GFELLER, E. AND ROBINSON, C. (1998) "Which language for teaching? The cultural messages transmitted by the languages used in education", in *Language and Education*, 12, (i), 18.
- HALLIDAY, M. A. K. (1978) *Language as a Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (Baltimore, University Park Press).
- LESSOW-HURLEY, J. (1990) *The Foundations of Dual Language Instruction* (New York, London, Longman).
- NDAWI, O. AND MASUKU, J. (1998) "Incorporating Local Folklore into the School Curriculum in Southern Africa". A paper presented at the *Fifth Biennial International Conference of the Southern Africa Folklore Society* (University of South Africa, 15-17 July).
- THE HERALD* (1998) "State must stop playing lip-service to indigenous languages", 27 July.
- UNESCO (1953) *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* (Paris, Unesco).