



Zimbabwe

The impact of language policy
and practice on children's learning:
Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa
2017

21.21 Zimbabwe

21.21.1 Background information

After more than 40 years of British rule as Southern Rhodesia, the minority white government of the colony declared independence as Rhodesia. Following 15 more years of guerrilla warfare, the state of Zimbabwe was established in 1980. At that time, Zimbabwe declared 16 official languages with a particular focus on Shona, Ndebele, and English. The National Constitution of 2013 confirms 16 officially recognized languages. It also affirms that the State must promote the use of all Zimbabwean languages, and create conditions for the development of these languages.

An estimated 75 per cent of the Zimbabwean population speaks Shona, and another 17 per cent speak Ndebele.

Ethnologue lists 21 languages for Zimbabwe.

2.21.2. Current language policy

Under the 1987 Education Act, language policy in Zimbabwe favours three languages for use in education: Shona, Ndebele, and English, as follows:

- “1. Subject to the provisions of this section [of the Act], the main languages of Zimbabwe, namely Shona, Ndebele and English, shall be taught in all primary schools from the first grade as follows:
- a. Shona and English in all areas where the mother tongue of the majority of the residents is Shona; or
 - b. Ndebele and English in all areas where the mother tongue of the majority of the residents is Ndebele.
1. Prior to Grade 4, either of the languages may be used as the medium of instruction, depending upon which language is more commonly spoken and better understood by the pupils.
 2. From Grade 4, English shall be the medium of instruction provided that Shona or Ndebele shall be taught as subjects on an equal-time-allocation basis as the English language.
 3. In areas where minority languages exist, the Minister may authorize the teaching of such languages in primary schools in addition to those specified in subsections (1), (2) and (3).” (Ndhlovu, 2008, p. 70)

The lack of clarity of this policy leads Nkomo (2008, p. 356) to comment that “language in education practices in independent Zimbabwe are not significantly different from those of the colonial era.”

The Education Act has been amended three times; Gotosa, Rwodzi and Mhlanga (2013, p. 92) note that “the proposed policy as amended in 1987, 1999 and 2006 to use English only, to use the mother tongue up to grade 3, and to use the mother tongue up to grade 7 respectively has never received full implementation and cannot at the moment be implemented” (p.92). However not all authors even agree on the dates of these amendments, which speaks to the implementation challenges that apparently accompanied them.

Chivhanga and Chimhenga (2013) asserted in 2013 that, policy notwithstanding, English is the predominant language of instruction: “Zimbabwe has three national languages, Shona, Ndebele and English but virtually all children are educated through the medium of English and are expected to study their mother tongue as a subject. English is being promoted as a supra ethnic language of national integration. The low status accorded to the African languages adversely affects their use in the education system” (p. 59).

In August 2016, a process was begun by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to amend the Education Act in order to align it with the National Constitution of 2013. In public stakeholder consultations held in 2016 and 2017, the language policy for education has been hotly debated.¹

2.21.3. Education policy and practice

According to the current Education Act, Zimbabwean languages other than Shona or Ndebele may be used in early primary classrooms. Muchenje, Goronga and Bondai (2013, pp. 501-502) note that the Act, states that indigenous minority languages such as Tonga, Venda, Kalanga and Shangaan are to be taught and used as languages of instruction up to Grade 3 in the areas where they are commonly spoken and understood; from Grade 4, pupils revert to either Shona or Ndebele, depending on the region of the country. Nevertheless, Muchenje et al argue that in practice, the Act is actually bad for indigenous language speakers.

1. UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2017.

In addition, the policy has not been implemented adequately. Gotosa et al (2013), note that, 26 years after the promulgation of the Education Act, teaching and writing in content subjects are still being done in English: “there are hardly any content and mathematics books written in indigenous languages for use up to grade three” (p. 90).

Gudhlanga and Makaudze (2012, p. 52) view the policy to be neo-colonial, given the central place of English: “this is a replica of the colonial language policies that valued a foreign language. That is why an Ordinary Level Certificate is still invalid without English but valid even without an indigenous language.”

The Government’s Education Medium Term Plan 2011-2015 (Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, n.d.) lists marginalized language communities as one area of action in “Strategic Priority Six: Focus resources on those with greatest need” (p. 24). The plan notes that “all local languages should be examined at various levels and as much as possible be utilized as media of instruction. Teaching [and] learning materials need to be developed so that the languages are examined at all levels up to ‘O’ level and even beyond” (ibid., p. 24).

The plan specifically calls for development of curricula and examinations for six “prioritized languages” (p. 27), although the six are not specified in the document.

A curriculum reform process begun in 2015 resulted in a curriculum framework that is more supportive of the use of the 16 languages recognized by the 2013 Constitution. Implementation of the curriculum began in January 2017; although the implementation process has begun with English, Shona and Ndebele syllabi and pedagogical materials, work is underway to produce such materials for the other officially recognized languages as well.

2.21.4. Studies

Muchenje et al (2013) describe a study on the perceptions of pupils from Nyanja/ Chewa-speaking background of the status of their mother tongue in the education system (p. 500). The study reveals

that the Zimbabwean language used in the classrooms is Shona rather than the language spoken by the community, which participants “labelled unfortunate.”

Gondo and Gondo (2012) examine the teacher-training model used for teaching in Shona and Ndebele, the two languages taught as subjects throughout the education system. The authors find the models to be weak and call for reform of indigenous teacher training.

Shizha (2012) reports on a qualitative study examining the effect of teaching science to rural primary school students using English. The study also investigated the opinions and attitudes of primary school teachers toward teaching science using an indigenous language (specifically, Shona). The findings “revealed institutional and attitudinal barriers to using chiShona as a language of instruction in science teaching and learning” (Shizha, 2012). It was also found that where Shona was the medium of instruction, a “lack of learning materials, education language policies, attitudes of teachers and administrators were found to be barriers” (p. 785).

Ndamba (2008) carried out a qualitative study of children’s and parents’ language of instruction preferences in view of the Zimbabwean language policy which, in theory, requires instruction from Grades 1 to 3 to be in the mother tongue. The study found that “pupils and parents preferred English as the language of instruction at infant level, despite challenges faced in accessing the curriculum through the use of the second language.” The study suggests that there is need for attitude change and “a serious campaign for all stakeholders to appreciate the role played by the mother tongue in the early years of schooling” (Ndamba, 2008, p. 171).

2.21.5. Language education initiatives

Early Reading Initiative

UNICEF supports the Ministry of Education's Early Reading Initiative, which strengthens the skills of infant class teachers and supervisors from Early Child Development Year 1 to Grade 2. The ERI improves teaching, supervision and assessment of learners' reading and writing skills. UNICEF also supports the procurement of reading materials in local languages, to support early-years teaching and learning.²

African Languages Research Institute (ARLI)

ALRI, an interdisciplinary research unit based at the University of Zimbabwe, was established in 2000. Chabata (2007) describes ALRI as "dedicated to the development of all indigenous languages spoken in Zimbabwe. Its goals are to research, document and develop the Zimbabwean indigenous languages in order to promote and expand their use in all spheres of life" (p. 281).

Zimbabwe Indigenous Languages Promotion Association (ZILPA)

Nyika (2008, p. 461) describes the establishment of a Zimbabwean language activist group in 2001. The Zimbabwe Indigenous Languages Promotion Association (ZILPA) was formed by representatives of

six Zimbabwean language groups (Tonga, Kalanga, Venda, Shangani, Nambya and Sotho) to campaign for the revitalisation of their languages.

ZILPA's main goal was to pressure the Government to amend the Education Act of 1987 so that the minority languages could be taught in schools throughout the system, like Shona and Ndebele. Nyika (2008) notes that ZILPA was instrumental in the amending the Education Act to allow for the teaching of six minority languages throughout the primary school system.



2. https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/1.2.1.2_ERI.pdf.