

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The influence of teachers and students' language attitudes towards the use of shona as medium of instruction in secondary schools

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The article examines the influence of language attitudes of secondary school teachers and students on their choices as to whether Shona can be used as medium of instruction in secondary schools. Language policy in Zimbabwe prescribes (albeit in a non-committal manner) the use of L1 as medium of instruction from Grade one to three. Thereafter, English (L2 for the majority of students) is used exclusively as medium of instruction except in the teaching of other languages. Over the years, debate has been rife regarding the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction at all levels of education. However, advocacy for such innovation has tended to ignore the influence of language attitudes of the clientele of such innovation. This article examined the attitudes of principal users and implementers of language change. The assumption in this article was that for language innovation to succeed, the users (teachers and students) need to hold favourable attitudes towards the intended language policy change and if not, the innovation is likely to suffer from tissue rejection (Obanya, 1987). The findings show that the majority of secondary school teachers and students prefer using English to Shona as medium of instruction. This leads to the conclusion that attitudes of users regarding the proposed language innovation, negatively affect the implementation of the proposed change. Attitudes of teachers, therefore, are keys to successful language innovation in education.

**Key words:** Shona, medium of instruction, language attitudes, former group B schools.

## INTRODUCTION

Although, there has been a great deal of debate and research on the desirability and suitability of using indigenous languages as media of instruction in education (Brock-Utne, 1993; Roy-Campbell, 1994; McNab, 1989; Bamgbose, 1991, 1976; Awoniyi, 1978; Phillipson, 1992) there has been far too little consideration of the language attitudes of the user community towards the proposed use of indigenous languages as media of instruction viz-a-vis the use of foreign languages legislated by the former colonial regimes.

Zimbabwe is a former British colony. Like other former colonies elsewhere, the colonial education system had adopted the language of the colonizers as medium of instruction – as “an instrument of ... socializing the

colonized into acceptance of inferior status, power and wealth” (Welch, 1988: 206). In Zimbabwe, the 1903 Education Ordinance laid the foundation for the subsequent dominance of English language in the Zimbabwean school curriculum. English language became associated with social status, political and economic power leading to most people developing favorable attitudes towards it. Accordingly, the language of the dominant group has been “promoted at the expense of minority or vanquished peoples” (Mupande, 2006: 1).

After independence, the education language policy in Zimbabwe has essentially remained as it was during the colonial period. It appears there has been lack of will power by policy makers to change the language policy to allow the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction. During the colonial period Shona was not used as medium of instruction and its “status was regarded as inferior to English” (The Presidential

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Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training, 1999: 157). English therefore has remained the official language, medium of instruction in schools, a compulsory subject and a requirement in all school certificates. It has remained entrenched in the socio-economic power over indigenous languages.

However, there has been pressure on the government against the continued use of English as the only medium of instruction at the exclusion of indigenous languages. This led to the setting up of a commission of inquiry into education that recommended that Shona and Ndebele be used together with English as media of instruction throughout the education system. Part of the recommendations read:

*ChiShona and IsiNdebele as well as English should be accorded national and official status and taught in all schools at all levels throughout the country.*

*ChiShona and IsiNdebele as well as English should be the media of instruction throughout the education and training system.*

*(The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training, 1999:169).*

Advocates for the use of mother-tongue education view the continued use of the former colonisers' language as an attempt to "remain fixed on the false premise that their indigenous languages are useless as vehicles of instruction in science and technology" (Rwambiwa, 1996: 1). The primary objective of this research was to investigate and discover whether these 'false premises' do not affect the language user community regarding their views as to whether Shona can be successfully used as a language of instruction at all levels of education in Zimbabwe.

It can be noted, however, that debate on the use of local languages as media of instruction in education had been viewed as a positive move as far back as the 1950s when UNESCO (1953: 11) declared that "the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue." This, coupled with a number of successful experiments on the use of indigenous languages as medium of instruction in various countries like the Seychelles, Tanzania, Ethiopia (Brock-Utne, 1993; Roy-Campbell, 1994; McNab, 1989) has tended to spur advocacy for use of indigenous languages in schools. It can also be noted that it is one thing for educationists to advocate for language policy change and quite another for the user community to embrace that change.

It is important to note that in Zimbabwe,

*the majority of the people did not always regard independence as an opportunity to transform society, but as an opportunity to have access to those social, economic, political and educational institutions that they felt they had been denied (Maravanyika, 1990: 3).*

In other words, for such people, the aim was not to really change the system but rather to be accepted into the system. As such, their attitudes towards the language of instruction have essentially remained as was during the colonial period. Through colonization, they had been severely tutored to admire the English language. It is, therefore, in our view, important to first ascertain the language attitudes of intended users before making any language policy change. It is quite possible that socio-political, economic and historical forces still create negativity on use of indigenous languages (Adegbija, 1994). This negativity may result in teachers and students' dislike of using such languages as media of instruction at secondary school level. Lind (1988) notes that adult learners may resist mother-tongue education for reasons such as, the prestige of the official language, its use in the formal education system, its utility for access to employment and to mass media and other written materials. This research looked at secondary school teachers and students' attitudes towards the use of Shona vis-à-vis English to determine whether they favour such language innovation.

### **What are language attitudes?**

Language attitudes are best appreciated by closely examining their origin. An attitude is an organized predisposition to think, feel, perceive, and behave toward referent or cognitive object ... an enduring structure of beliefs that predisposes the individual to behave selectively toward attitude referent (Taylor et al., 1997: 130; Ajzen, 1988:4; Kerlinger, 1986: 453; Kosslyn and Rosenberg, 2006: 738).

Attitudes are the "very general evaluations that people hold of themselves, other people, objects and issues" (Tesser, 1995: 196). In short, an attitude is a disposition to respond favourably or unfavourably towards an object, person, institution or event. Attitudes locate objects of thought on dimensions of judgment (McGuire, 1985 in Lindzey and Aronson, 1985). Such a disposition can be towards language (referent object) that may be viewed favourably or unfavourably. An attitude is in fact a belief that forms a capacity that is directed towards certain aspects in human life. Attitudes are thus, "organizations of beliefs about things out there" (Kerlinger, 1986: 456) that predispose individuals to behave or respond in a certain manner towards an attitude object. The said language attitudes can reside in our cognitive, affective and / or behavioural realms.

Attitudes take a positive or negative direction with very few cases being neutral (Kosslyn and Rosenberg, 2006). Since attitudes to language form a belief (in individuals) in relation to the referent object, their effect on language policy change cannot be taken for granted since they play an important role leading to either acceptance or rejection of language policy change. It is imperative that language

attitudes of users be taken into account before change in the language of instruction is effected. Any attempt at change that is perceived as a threat to individuals' sacredly held beliefs (attitudes) is likely to be resisted. In spite of nationalistic feelings that people may have, they may still wish to learn or have their children taught through the medium of English because of things that they perceive it does for them, for example, good employment or acceptance by the 'significant others'. It is quite evident that the language attitudes that we hold may seriously affect how we use language in different spheres of our lives.

### Development of language attitudes in Zimbabwe

There are a number of learning theories that explain how language attitudes develop. The Learning Theory regards attitudes as habits hence they are learned (Taylor, Peplau and Sears, 1997). People are generally seen as primarily passive. When they are exposed to stimuli, they are thought of as capable of learning through association, reinforcement or through observation and imitation that incidentally accounts for a person's attitudes. As a consequent, the end product (attitude) contains the associations, values and bits and pieces of information an individual would have accumulated over a period in respect of the referent object. Just like habit formation, attitudes would be "inculcated by varying contingencies of reinforcement" (McLaughlin, 1987: 7). Tessler (1995: 222) reports that there is a large amount of research studies that have shown that "people's attitudes can be influenced by pairing some target object with some stimulus" about which the person already feels positively or negatively, or placing the target object in some context that induces positive or negative feelings.

In the then Rhodesia (colonized Zimbabwe), the colonialists legislated English language as the only medium of instruction in schools. The chain reaction leading to the subsequent dominance of English in the school curriculum was set off in 1903 following the first education ordinance (Atkinson, 1972). Through a subtle tutelage Africans in Zimbabwe came to regard English, and indeed associate it with knowledge, goodness, sweetness and an array of other positives. Those who could speak it received commendation and were made to feel that they were far better than those who could not speak it. For most Africans, English became synonymous to knowledge and education. Speaking good English was, wrongly of course, seen as an indicator that one was educated. English was thus, associated with good life and as such, attitudes towards it became favourable. Those unable to speak English were regarded as backward.

On the other hand, indigenous languages were never associated with the good life or images of educated people thus attracting negative attitudes towards them.

Equally important to note is that Shona and Ndebele were not economically empowered to command positive evaluation. It becomes apparent that for Shona and Ndebele to be positively viewed as likely media of instruction they must be associated with positive things just as English had been for decades. For this counter-attitudinal act to occur, "there has to be enough incentives" (Taylor, Peplau and Sears, 1997:145).

Reinforcement and punishment explain another way by which learning can occur. In this case, a particular behaviour is followed (reinforced) by either pleasurable rewards or by punishment. As an attitude-inducing agent, rewards offered to the Africans who could speak English reinforced positive attitudes towards the English language. This further entrenched the use of local languages. It was not uncommon that speaking in local languages at school was a punishable offence. This still obtain in some schools. As a result, there has been a long history of negative evaluation (negative attitudes) regarding the use of indigenous languages in education.

Observational learning asserts that people learn social attitudes and behaviour simply by "watching other people known technically as models" (Taylor, Peplau and Sears, 1997: 7). Such learning can occur without external reinforcement. Observational learning may incorporate imitation or modeling that occurs when a person, not only observes, but actually copies the behaviour of the model. People imitate those they regard as strong or important. The 'significant others' in Zimbabwe have always been those who have, one way or the other, been empowered through the English language. Unfortunately, English was used as a gate-keeper for most Zimbabweans. As already stated, for secondary school teachers and their students to commit a counter-attitudinal act, Shona and Ndebele must hold high expectancy-value to ensure that once people have learnt through them they are assured of the 'good' life they yearn for. Unfortunately, the economic sector in Zimbabwe has firmly kept English at the pinnacle of the school curriculum.

These observations indicate that unless Shona and Ndebele are empowered they are unlikely to command positive attitudes in secondary school teachers and students. It is therefore, highly unlikely that secondary school teachers and students would embrace the proposed language policy change. These are consumers of language policy who have a greater say as to whether the proposed innovation can succeed or not, hence they should have positive attitudes towards the proposed language. This research, therefore, intend to establish the attitudes of secondary school teachers and students regarding the use of Shona as medium of instruction at secondary school level.

### METHODOLOGY

This research employed the survey design to gather information about secondary school teachers and students' language attitudes

**Table 1.** Teachers and students' views on English remaining medium of instruction as is at present [teachers n = 40 and students n = 302] (English should remain as the only medium of instruction at secondary school level).

Status of respondents	Agree / yes (%)	Neutral / Do not know (%)	Disagree / No (%)
Teachers	27 (68)	5 (12)	8 (20)
Students	264 (87)	-	38 (13)

**Table 2.** Teachers and students' views on Shona becoming medium of instruction at secondary school level (teachers n = 40 and students n = 302) [Shona should be used as medium of instruction at secondary school level].

Status of respondents	Agree / yes (%)	Neutral / Do not know (%)	Disagree / No (%)
Teachers	10 (25)	3 (8)	27 (67)
Students	42 (14)	27 (9)	233 (77)

towards the use of Shona as medium of instruction at secondary school level. The survey design is suitable for the study of attitudes of individuals as information is given directly by respondents (Babbie, 1989; Tuckman, 1978). Since the problem under investigation is located in social psychology, it was necessary to obtain information directly from the respondents. As such, the questionnaire and interview methods were used for data collection.

The intention of this research was not necessarily to look at relationships of variables in language attitudes, but rather to examine the prevalence of these language attitudes in secondary school teachers and students. Consequently, the researchers did not find it necessary to develop a research model of attitudes specifying relationships of variables for example, language attitudes versus gender.

Respondents in this research comprised secondary school teachers and students in former Group B schools in Masvingo urban. The schools that made up the population for the study are Masvingo Christian College, Mucheke High School, Ndarama High School and Masvingo Day Secondary School. These schools share more or less similar contextual environments. They cater for children from moderate to poor backgrounds. It is this group that the proposed language innovation is meant to empower.

In total, 40 teachers out of a population of 174 took part. Of the 40 teachers 22 were male and 18 were female. All are qualified with teaching experience ranging from 1 to 17 years. The decision to work with qualified and experienced teachers was to ensure that their opinions and views were based on what is obtains in the teaching field. It was, therefore, necessary to work with qualified and experienced teachers who had enough time to reflect over the issues affecting education (Kadodo, 2010). Out of a population of 3016 students, 302 constituted the sample of which 161 were girls whilst 141 were boys. Ages of students varied between 12 and 20 years with 52% falling in the age range of 15 - 16 years. Although age of students was not used for selection, the ages were representative of the various levels in the secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

### Procedures

Data gathering for this research was done in the months of January to March 2008. The selection of participants was done using randomization to reduce the probability of a biased sample (Sapsford and Jupp, 2006; Borg and Gall, 1978; Tuckman, 1978; Kerlinger, 1986). Stratified random sampling was used to select participants. This was done in recognition of the two strata in the population, that is, teachers and students. It was hoped that stratified random sampling would ensure that elements of teachers

and students were organized into non-overlapping groups (Sapsford and Jupp, 2006). This allowed results from teachers and students to be distinctly representative. Collected data could, therefore, be related to teachers and students' sentiments regarding their choice of language of instruction.

Data was gathered through the interview and questionnaire methods. Interviews yielded authentic and qualitative data that was interpreted to explain participants' views (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). The interviews were carried out by the researchers. The questionnaire, on the other hand, allowed the researchers to convert data into information as offered by respondents (Kadodo and Kadodo, 2011; Tuckman, 1978). The questionnaire was distributed and collected after completion by the researchers to counter non-return. The collected data were organized into tables and graphs for analysis and discussions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected were organized into graphs and tables for interpretation of teachers and students' language attitudes.

The teachers' responses in Figure 1 clearly indicated that most teachers still prefer using English (75%) compared to Shona (25%). As for students, 89% preferred English whereas only 11% preferring Shona. Comparatively, English still commands high positive attitudes in both teachers and students compared to Shona. The aforementioned results clearly indicated that teachers and students may not necessarily support the said language policy innovation.

Table 1 shows the majority of teachers (68%) and students (87%) that were in agreement with the statement that English should remain the only medium of instruction at secondary school level. When the same statement expressing the view that Shona should be used as medium of instruction at secondary school level (Table 2) was given, 67% of teachers and 77% of students disagreed. Only 25% of teachers and 14% of students agreed with the view.

Results in Tables 1 and 2 clearly indicate that most respondents are not in favour of the proposed language innovation. Positive attitudes of most of the respondents

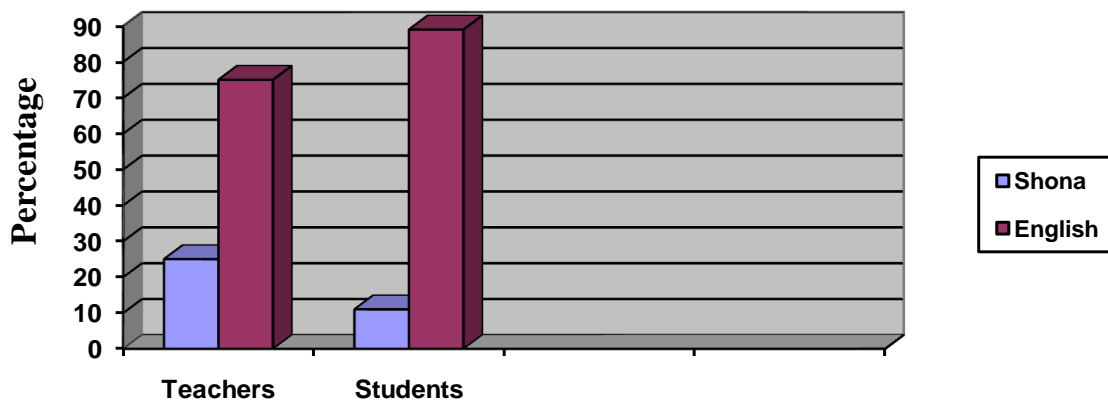


Figure 1. Preferred language of instruction [teachers n = 40 and students n = 302].

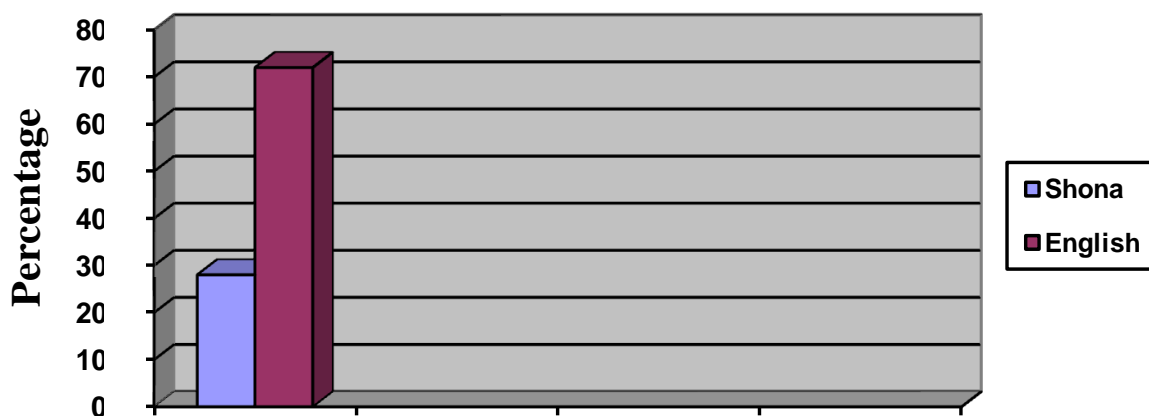


Figure 2. Students' admiration of fluent speakers of either Shona or English (n = 302).

Table 3. Students' responses to statements about Shona (n = 302).

Statements	Has very little use In our lives now (%)	It should be medium of instruction at secondary level (%)	I prefer Shona as medium of instruction (%)	It is not adequate for teaching science and for technological advancement (%)
Agree	169 (56)	86 (28)	60 (20)	199 (66)
Disagree	133 (44)	216 (72)	242 (80)	103 (34)

are shown in Figure 1. Table 1 and 2 support results presented in Figure 2 and Table 3.

Students' admiration of people who are fluent in a language is an indication of their inner feelings toward the referent object. The Figure 2 indicates that 72% of students admired their colleagues who were fluent in English whilst only 28% admired those fluent in Shona. Responses of students indicate which language is valued higher than others. In a way, this shows their language attitudes towards the two languages. For most of the students, English is still received as a language with status hence positive attitudes towards speakers who are fluent in English.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Shona. The same views can also be observed in Table 3 where Shona does not seem to attract positive evaluations.

Table 3 shows results of students' responses to evaluative statements about Shona. 56% felt that Shona had very little use in their lives. As for Shona becoming medium of instruction at secondary school level 72% disagreed. Further, 80% disagreed with the view that they prefer Shona for medium of instruction at secondary school level. 66% agreed with the view that Shona is inadequate for teaching science and for technological advancement. The same view was echoed by some teachers during interviews (Inset 1) when the interviewee

ML asked the researcher, "What would you call sulphuric acid in Shona?" Interview results also consistently reiterate the same attitudes as already discussed in the foregoing.

## Conclusion

The focus of this research was to find out what language attitudes are held by secondary school teachers and students regarding the use of Shona as medium of instruction. The research has indicated that these language attitudes are of significant since they affect implementation of language innovation. Results consistently show that the majority of respondents did not prefer the use of Shona as medium of instruction at secondary school level. Most of the respondents preferred that English remain the only medium of instruction at secondary school level. It can be noted that language innovation should be a problem-solving activity. For successful implementation of language innovation, the users (teachers and students) must view the proposed change favourably.

Most respondents in this research felt that English offers them better opportunities for employment compared to Shona. English was seen as empowering them to compete well in the global village. English seems to guarantee them "access to the system and equal opportunity to participate in it" (Adegbija, 1994: 3). As can be observed in Table 3, the majority of students (56%) felt that Shona had little use in their lives and 66% also felt that it is inadequate for teaching science and for technological advancement. As such, changing to indigenous languages is viewed as a direct threat to their (respondents') perceived job opportunities, thus attracting negative attitudes.

The aforementioned observations led to the conclusion that language attitudes of users, whether cognitive, affective or behavioral, matter much in language planning. Unless and until attitudes change favourably towards the proposed language, users will continue to reject the intended language innovation.

## Recommendations

In view of the findings discussed in this article, it is suggested that implementation of language innovation should be preceded by a clear understanding of the language attitudes of the intended users. This is to ascertain whether their language attitudes are positive enough to support use of the proposed indigenous language. One has to note that even where the language innovation is likely to benefit users if they do not view it as such they are unlikely to support the language change because it would suffer from tissue rejection (Obanya, 1987). In cases where the language attitudes are

negative, measures ought to be taken to encourage users to develop positive attitudes towards the proposed language change. This can be achieved in various ways. As a way of encouraging positive attitudes, the proposed language should be incentivised to ensure that those educated through the said language would get employment, or get vacancies for training provided they passed. It is therefore imperative to note that language innovation should be devoid of emotion and guided by research findings.

Mass media (both print and electronic) need to play an influential role in shaping people's attitudes towards the proposed language change. The media can shape language attitudes through its socialization function. Mass media portray the values of society, and by watching, listening and reading, we learn how people are supposed to act and what values are important (Dominick, 2005). The values communicated through the media may also encourage the status quo by enforcing social norms that promote the use of indigenous languages in education. Mass media could also play an important role by providing a rich environment for the use and interaction with the proposed language. This is possible if the media communicates important matters through the proposed language. The current situation in Zimbabwe does not promote the use of any indigenous language because out of about ten (10) national newspapers only one (1) publishes in Shona and Ndebele. The rest use English exclusively.

Government sectors could also help by encouraging communication through the proposed language, for instance in courts of law. One can note here that the Legal Research Foundation has made a positive start by translating some of the law documents into Shona and Ndebele. More can still be done in other sectors to encourage the use of local languages.

Non-governmental organizations could also play a vital role in encouraging the use of indigenous languages. They could do this by using the selected languages in their meetings with community members. Their printed materials could also be in the selected language. Labels in packaging of commodities distributed to various communities in the country could be in the proposed language.

The researchers believe that language innovation requires a holistic approach to ensure success. It is a proposition that does not require piecemeal and non-committal approaches. When we propose language innovation we should be ready to make substantial overhauls in the existing language policy in place. Language is a very pervasive commodity that affects various sectors and people in a nation. It is therefore imperative that thorough research is carried out to inform on whatever decision planners arrive at.

**Definitions: SHONA,** One of the main indigenous

languages spoken in Zimbabwe. It is L1 to about 75% of the Zimbabwean population (Stoneman and Cliffe, 1989) and is the dominant language in the areas generally referred to as Mashonaland. Shona is L1 to people of the dialects Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika, Korekore and Ndau. The language referred to as Shona or ChiShona came into existence following the unification of the said dialects by Professor Doke in 1931 (Chimhundu, 1984).

**GROUP B SCHOOLS:** These were schools that were set up to cater for African students during the colonial period. The end of use of these tags was marked by the attainment of political independence on 18 April 1980. These schools in reality continue to cater for the middle to lower class children whilst former Group A schools accommodate children from the upper-middle and upper classes. Determination of who attends at former Group A schools is defined by the high fees and school levies that are charged. Technically, the high amounts tend to exclude children from the middle and lower class.

## INSET

### Inset 1

#### Interview schedule

#### Interview No 2

**Date of interview:** 12 – 02 – 08

**School name code:** MXC

**Interviewee name code:** ML

**Designate:** Senior Master & HOD Science

Researcher: May I know whether you ever attended any meetings held by the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training?

ML No.: Most of us were never informed of these meetings. They were not properly publicized.

Researcher: Some people in Zimbabwe are of the view that using English as medium of instruction in schools results in low pass rates. As a result, they advocate for use of Shona and Ndebele in addition to English. What are your views on this?

ML: Maybe, but I do not see it that way. If we change to our local languages we may even have worse problems, for example terminology in science. Tell me, what would you call sulphuric acid in Shona?

Researcher: But wouldn't you say terms can be created when the need arises to capture these new demands in indigenous languages?

ML: Agreed, but why do we want to get to a point where we talk of making these policy changes before we have done thorough home-work to see what can work and what may not work? Terminology is not the only problem here, think of the rest of the teachers who are not teaching Shona and Ndebele. They will need retraining for them to handle their subjects in local languages. We would also need to make a complete overhaul

of reading materials.

Researcher: In other words, you do not subscribe to the idea of Shona and Ndebele being used at secondary school level as media of instruction?

ML: Personally, I am not. I prefer that the language policy remain as it is presently with Shona and Ndebele being used as media of instruction up to Grade Three only. Like I said, I do not think that our problems in education are a result of us using English. There are other serious issues like availability of reading and other teaching materials. After all, most people in Zimbabwe have English language, why waste a resource we already have?

Researcher: Thank you Mr. ML for your time.

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