

## **Mother Tongue or International Language – The African Anomaly**

**Gift Rupande**

Department of Student Affairs  
Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)  
grupande@yahoo.com

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**Abstract:** *Language is a facility to manipulate knowledge in a symbolic framework that enables humans to derive deeper meaning from their experience. The pursuit of national cohesion and receptiveness to technology in the use of international languages as both official and teaching languages have pervaded the systems of education and governance in most African countries. Zimbabwe boasts of many indigenous languages like Shona, Ndebele, Venda and many others. However, the language policy in Zimbabwe stipulate that grade one to three should be taught in mother tongue except when teaching English. The question is to what extent is this being implemented? In Zimbabwe most pupils in the rural have limited contact with English hence they have less chances of picking up English before they enter school. If English is used as a medium of instruction instead of their mother tongue, low achievement will ensue. The paper seeks to explore the importance of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction, the obstacles faced in the promotion of African languages in education, the cost effectiveness of bilingual education and recommendations on how best both local and international languages can effectively be utilized in the education system for the benefit of the student.*

**Keywords:** *Mother Tongue, Second Language, Language policy, Language.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

All human beings use language in one way or another for different purposes. The ability to represent complex thought is uniquely human. Language is one other social skill a child has to learn. In the area of education language is fundamental on all aspects as a chief vehicle for the transmission of information, as a most flexible means of expressing, receiving and challenging discoveries, as an instrument of social regulation and as a public endorsement of various values of the system (Wallack and Butler (1994). Mother tongue and second language are very important for learning. Unlike other countries in the world, African countries have experienced serious problems in identifying a single language as a medium of instruction, especially in the primary school due to multilingualism. Mwamwenda (1995) comments that countries for example, Zimbabwe adopted the use of mother tongue as a language of instruction for their three years of basic education. This is followed by the official medium of instruction up to tertiary level. The critical question now is “Is this policy being implemented?” It is the intention of this paper to delve deeper into this issue and find out the possible problems which might arise as a result of not adopting the mother tongue at lower levels of primary education.

### **2. DEFINITION OF TERMS**

#### **2.1. Language**

Fontana (1997) defines languages as a specifically human and non instinctive methods of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. According to Ruch (1984) language can be defined as a socially shared code or conventional system for representing concepts through the use of arbitrary symbols and rule governed combinations of those symbols. Chomsky (1980) in Cole and Cole (1994) echoed that implicit rules are shown by the speech patterns of any native language. Language is a medium of communication which is culturally bound and no universal language exists.

#### **2.2. Mother Tongue**

Mwamwenda (1995) refers to mother tongue as the ethnic language whilst Fontana (1997) refers to mother tongue as the primary language used by the individual’s cultural group. Mother tongue could be defined as the language spoken by the parents and guardians of the child.

### 2.3. Second Language

Mwamwenda (1995) refers to the second language as the metropolitan language. It is the language which the child acquires after the acquisition of the mother tongue. For instance, English is the second language in Zimbabwe.

### 2.4. Importance of Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction

Vygotsky (1972) affirms that universally the most important learning tool is the specific language of each society. Language exists by virtue of a social rather than a logical or empirical construct. Language use and development is nested in a particular socio-cultural context. The mastery of language puts the entire reality within the child's potential grasp so that he or she can also control reality through language. Vygotsky (1972) posits that the development of a child's concepts depends on a social context and on the linguistic resources within the culture. We make sense of words and concepts by locating them in our known world. It would be difficult if not impossible for a child to develop a concept which is not expressed in his or her own cultural or social context. Bourdieu (1978) proposed that language is never just a vehicle to express ideas but it comes as a product and process of social activity which is differentiating and differentiates and thus differently valued within a field of social activity. Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual SAARMSTEC conference university of Pretoria (2006) recommended that all children must be taught in a language they are fluent in because students learn better in their own first language. The above idea was in concurrence with the Bangkok-UNESCO Conference (2003) which pointed out the need for using the mother tongue in the primary stages of education in order to improve the quality of education as well as for preserving the language.

Zimbabwe boasts of many indigenous languages like Shona, Ndebele, Venda, and many others. The language policy of Zimbabwe stipulates that grade one to three should be taught in mother language except when teaching English. Most pupils in rural areas of Zimbabwe have a non-English speaking background hence have less chances of picking up English before they enter school. If English is used as a medium of instruction instead of their mother tongue, low achievement is likely to ensue. The pupils have to go through the process of translating, synthesizing and translating again. The student first translates what he or she hears into his/her mother tongue, analyses the information given in his/her mother tongue, formulates the response in the mother tongue and then translates the answer into English.

McInerney and McInerney (2002) asserted that students who arrive at school unable to understand or speak the language of instruction suffer a double jeopardy, in the sense that they are expected to master new cognitive skills as well as mastering a new oral and written language in which these skills are encoded. Lemmer and Dekker (1994) also share the same view, as they proposed that students who have limited proficiency in the language of instruction are at most risk of falling and dropping out of school because they have not mastered the language required to cope with the learning material. The above scenario calls for the need for the students to be taught in mother tongue. The 14<sup>th</sup> Annual University of Pretoria in 2006 maintained that low performance of most learners in previously disadvantaged schools is because learners are learning in the language that they are not fluent in. They argued that those African students who have learnt English without mother tongue foundation are likely to impair their ability to think conceptually. Students who learn reading and writing skills in their mother tongue perform better in school than those whose basic education is solely through a second language (Singh 2003).

According to Nziramasanga (1999) the National Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe recommended that national language must be developed to the point where they can be used in science and technology. Vygotsky (1972) is of the opinion that language transmits culture. A culture provides connecting links between concepts offering a scaffolding of understanding on which a child can build. Westley (1992) pointed out that the mother tongue in the primary years offers the best introduction to literacy and eventually is an aid to English acquisition. Mother tongue provides a better facility for thinking and communicating and should be used as the medium of instruction especially during early school years. Bruner (1952) concedes that language in learning is more than a means of communication but also having a significant part in the development of thought. There is interwoven of language and thought and for cognitive development to occur children require mastery of the first language as the basis to develop their thoughts. Cultural preservationists are concerned that the continued use of English as the official language can be potentially harmful to indigenous language in that it may lead to their

extinction, accompanied by more importantly lose of culture and national identity. Feurstein in Fisher (1999) comments that cultural experience provides a powerful means of human beings to interpret reality. The values, social rituals, traditional customs, myths and stories which are handed down also provides the necessary raw materials which the child uses to develop his/her information processing capacities. As the mother tongue withers, conceptual thoughts run the risk of dying out too.

Kelly (1977) states that the acquisition of the learning techniques such as reading, writing, thinking, speaking and calculating, that is knowing about the environment and the society well as the acquisition of socially desirable habits are best done in indigenous language of pupils.

Language is culturally bound and as such perceptual ability in a given culture largely depends on the understanding of that particular language. If a language does not have certain words for instance to define colour then children would have difficulties in distinguishing colour perceptually. In shone or Ndebele all foods that are sour or bitter are described as “Zvinovara” or “kuyava” in Ndebele. How bitter is the different foods cannot be distinguished in those languages. Colours like peach, orange and pink are all “red/tsvuku/ubomvu in shone or Ndebele respectively. Whorf in Carlson and Buskit (1984) contends that the background linguistic of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas rather it is a shaper of ideas.

Intergovernmental conference of /ministers (1987) posits t hat it is a universally acknowledged principle in modern education that child should receive instruction both in and through his or her mother tongue and this privilege should not be withhold from the African child. The use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction promotes and facilitates effective learning more than the use of second language.

Children whose mother tongue is a medium of instruction have undue advantage over their friends who may have only learned it as a second or third language. According to Kalejaiye (1985) learning mathematics in mother tongue help the learner in visualising diagrammatically the concepts being learned, whereas the second language may quickly lead to the acquisition of mathematical notation without in depth understanding of the concept. Dembo (1994) pointed out that the use of a language which is not the language already spoken by the child results in cognitive and pedagogical difficulties. This is because communicative competencies are better developed in the first language like English introduced at school. Khumalo (2005) argued that we need mental decolonization to facilitate respect and acceptance of our languages. Shumba, Coss and Zillg (1997) in a baseline survey for the Better Environmental Science Teaching (BEST) programme in Zimbabwe found out that pupils lacked proficiency in the use of the English language and thus failed to participate or contribute to discussions and questions. Tanzania has prospered in championing the used of Swahili s the official language and China, Malaysia and Japan use their mother tongue; hence their technology is far ahead of most countries. According respect to the child’s mother tongue in school entails cognitive and effective benefits for the reason that the mother tongue is the very life blood of human self awareness, the corners or identity and the safe repository of vast array of affective and cognitive templates making up the total web of personality (Cummins (1984).

### **2.5. Obstacles faced in the promotion of African languages in Education**

- The lack of absence of appropriate language policies in most African countries is an obstacle to the promotion of African languages.
- The lack of political will to enforce policy based on the promotion of African languages.
- The lack of sufficient teaching and supporting literature.
- The absence of adequate training of trainers in the use of African languages in education.
- The absence of an enabling environment for learning.
- The low priority given to funding African language development.
- The absence of standardization in most of the languages, particularly minority ones.

### **3. THE AFRICAN ANOMALY**

Today, a long time after independence the maintenance of policies based exclusively on English, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese languages that were used as the principal instruments of European colonization and exploitation is no longer appropriate. Although history has made these European languages an undeniable characteristics of our linguistic landscape, it would be a mistake to

believe that we can ever achieve true development if we remain exclusively African and European languages should rather be encouraged in our education system, with the African languages being given priority over the European languages.

If it is true that all development starts with a dream, then Africa must recognize that her citizen work, eat, drink, eat, sleep and dream in African languages and that their development should be built on the languages that best express their interest, aspirations, needs and dreams. This calls for consideration of the psychosocial, cultural, cognitive and academic effects of present policies on the learning process. The domination of foreign language policies in our education systems directly implies exclusion for speakers of African languages. Continuous dependence on foreign languages, therefore, is nothing short of mental enslavement. In the twenty first century, when written communication is the basis of all modern development, African governments needs to integrate political, socio-cultural and educational motivations into their language policy designs. As long as African languages are restricted to oral use, while children are learning in foreign tongues, underdevelopment on the continent will remain a living reality. In Zimbabwe and many other African countries the dominance of English is a natural phenomenon. English as a second language is regarded as the language of economy because it provides entry to the middle jobs and middle class pay packets (Granville, Janks, Mphahlele, Romani and Watson (1998) Bourdieu (1978) views English as a language remuneration or as linguistic capital. English has been given symbolic power. Practices within the classroom or wider society serve to legitimate English over other forms of language. English is used as an official or semi – official language in over sixty countries and has a prominent place in further twenty (Setati (2000). Proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual SAARMSTE conference University of Pretoria (2006) echoed that learners whose linguistic background is not a continuity to the classroom practices are likely to be deprived of the social goods of learning for instance mathematics. As a result it is logical it is logical for students to learn in a language that is recognized and has symbolic power. Granville et.al (1998) maintains that schools have given students a high regard for English without really giving them full knowledge of English. African students are trapped unconsciously in this dichotomy. They want to know English so as to have access to social and economic goods without realizing the negative effects of English in their learning and teaching. Langa and Setati (2006)'s research study shows that children's choice of English is influence by the status that English has been given worldwide. Granville et.al (1998) argued that mother tongue instructions do not have any linguistic capital or symbolic power; it cannot be seen as an alternative to understanding for instance mathematics.

Janks in Granville et.al (1998) highlights another dichotomy that English poses on African language. He argues that if you provide pupils with access to the dominant language you perpetuate dominance of that language and if you deny them access to the dominant language you perpetuate marginalization. Nicol (2004) laments that these learners want to access this dominant language without realizing that their home language are marginalized because of the socio-political situation they find themselves in. Kalejaiye (1995) says the major difficulty faced by bilingual pupils like in solving word problems is their inability to read simple English. A study of bilingual Nigerians showed that some may not be able to read simple English until the third or fourth year in school. In Zimbabwe success in examination heavily depends on the competence of pupils in the western language. According to Bonch and Tombari (1997) the medium of instruction used by the test administrator to instruct test takers may affect testing and test scores. The language that the examiner uses may be biased towards one group of children. For example, English may disadvantaged minority learners who may obtain scores if suitable medium of instruction is used. Evidence of this was shown by a research study by Bernstan (1968) cited by Bonch and Tombari (1997) who established that pupils from high social economic background, possess the elaborated code of language which is the language used in schools. The researcher also established that these pupils are at an advantage compared to pupils from low socio-economic background lacking the language used in school. To those pupils from the low socio-economic background there is no continuity from home to school.

Commins (1981) posits that English material makes little sense to pupils. Woolfock (1995) contends that because the language of instruction in schools typically occurs in standard English and because evidence of achieving requires expression in standard English, children who speak any other language are at a disadvantage. As discussed earlier, pupils lack the frame of reference they have when using Shona or Ndebele in any other subject than when using English because it is not part of their social context. From a political point of view, declaring one language as the national language may cost the unity of the country, as those who are not associated with the declared language are likely to assist

and reject such policy. It could also lead to political rivalry for instance a division between Ndebele and Shona. Administratively it may be costly to give equal recognition to all language in terms of time, resources and experts in school context. Ideologically and culturally there is consensus regarding the need to learn a former colonial language like English but the question is when should such a language introduced. The introduction of such language should not supplant the child's indigenous language in view of its cultural significance for both communication and identity purposes, (Mwamwenda, (1995). The language policy adopted at independence and which is enshrined in the (1987) Education Act sought to enhance the status of local languages while recognizing the importance of English as a language of business administration and international relations. The colonial language allowed the teaching of major local languages of Shona and Ndebele from grade one to university as subjects, but they were not the medium of instruction in schools and their status like the culture they represented was regarded as inferior to English.

#### 4. COST EFFECTIVENESS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

There are common misconceptions amongst many of the African stakeholders in education. Kathleen Heugh has illustrated through a cost-benefit analysis that the use of bilingual education actually offers enormous benefits for the African country from an economic as well as an educational point of view. Heugh (2000) argued that the source for the general misconceptions lies in the focus on the input or direct costs of implementing bilingual education programmes, instead of looking at the actual costs. These would in fact be offset by the financial savings and social benefits, within seven years. Heugh (2000) pointed out that there is evidence that African language education is cost-effective and beneficial for social development. The financial savings gained through in implementing bilingual education and the use of mother language instruction in African schools would be accompanied by lower repetition rates caused by language difficulties and lower dropouts rates. The other benefits could be lower incidence of HIV infection, which several studies show is directly related to longer schools attendance.

#### 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Governments should develop school and community in local languages on official reading
- At national level, governments should develop cultural spaces which to promote books in local languages using various means, writing contests, festivals, book signings writing and illustration workshops, debates and radio and television programs.
- Governments should create a fund to support publishing in local languages and establish financial incentives such as exemption from for those whose business deals with local language and cultural products.
- Governments should support those African universities offering diploma and degree courses in publishing, so that those universities boost their research in African languages. African publishing houses could then rely on local institutions to train qualified publishing personnel such as authors, designers, illustrators, managing directors, etc.
- The political leaders at national and regional levels should adopt cultural and language policies that encourages the development of endogenous book production in local and official languages.

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#### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**



**Gift Rupande** is a senior lecturer in the department of Applied Social Sciences at the Zimbabwe Open University. He has written, presented and published more than thirty research articles. His research interests are in education. Currently he is a DPHIL candidate. Gift Rupande holds a masters in student Affairs and masters in educational Psychology. He has an honours degree in Psychology and diplomas in adult education, personnel management, counselling and module writing.