

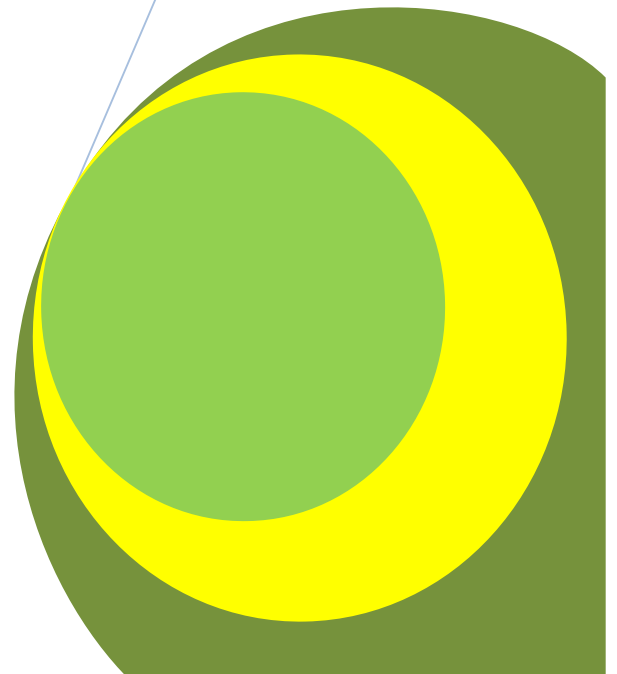
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The Zimbabwean First Languages seem to be slowly Dying a Natural Death: A Case of University Student's Academic Writing

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Research Article

The Zimbabwean First Languages seem to be slowly Dying a Natural Death: A Case of University Student's Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT

Communication Skills is a course offered to university students especially to first year first semester students. The essence of this course is to prepare students for study in their specific areas, to equip them with study skills and writing skills. Different departments have different requirements. However, the academics largely depend upon sound writing skills. At University of Zimbabwe the department has moved from giving a one off training to those who had not passed General English then now Communication skills to offering it to every student. The Engineering department is said to have asked the communication skills department to offer the course continuously to its student other departments also sort for the same offer. Regardless of such a long standing establishment it has been noted that students still lack competence in the writing of assignments and reports in their various areas of specialisation. The study specifically looks at Bindura University of Science Education Students who are offered communication skills in their first year. The university at large like any other university is complaining about the quality of written work that is being produced by the current university student. The paper tackled the issue of poor writing skills from the language issue perspective emanating from the Zimbabwean language policy. A needs Analysis as the research methodology has been adopted where the linguistically needs of the students were interrogated against the current assignment writing standard displayed. The qualitative paradigm being the dominate research adopted has seen analysis in terms of the narratives dominating. Very little in terms of analysis of data has culminated in quantitative analysis.

Keywords: First languages, dying a natural death, "O" Level four year secondary school Examination Ordinary level, "A" Level Advanced level six year secondary school examination, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) multilingualism, bilingualism.

INTRODUCTION

According to South African journal of education ISSN 0256-0100 on line journal 2010 language in education policy affects learner's opportunities for academic achievement and their eventual life chances. Moreover, it may shape socio-economic and political power relationship outside the school. This is basically what is happening to a larger extent with regards to secondary school going students who fail to pursue their education due to the fact that they would have failed English at Ordinary Level Examination. English is a prerequisite for one either to enter the job market or to further their education. For those that have managed to pass at the "O" level, most of them are meeting with some challenges in the presentation of their academic work in the form of assignment writing at university level. The argument pursuing in this paper is that the language complexity at university level is a result of poor first language base a situation encouraged by a Eurocentric kind of language policy used in Zimbabwe.

Language for academic purposes is the type of English used by various academics to expound on their exploitation of reality. In Zimbabwe the formal language of communication in schools is English. English is the language for Education. English is also a selection criterion for students to either enter the job market or the higher institution for education. It is therefore very important for parents to see to it that their children excel in this very important language. In the quest for wanting the best in terms of the future for their children, parents seem to denigrate the development of the first languages. However it is the development of these languages especially for non native English speakers that would see the smooth development of bilingualism. The issue of negating the first languages partly due to the language policy and the non socio-economic factors associated with the achievement of the first languages have to a greater extent contributed to the issue of a poor language base and

poor second language writing skills to university students. The paper had made an extensive analysis of the policy issues as negating the first language which results in the unpopularity of these first languages to the detriment of the acquisition and flourishing of bilingualism.

Back ground to the Study.

➤ Needs analysis has a vital role in the process of designing and carrying out any language course. According to Iwai et al. (1999), formal needs analysis is relatively new to the field of language teaching. However, informal needs analysis have been conducted by teachers in order to assess what language points their students needed to master. With this observation in mind, one can conclude that the language course designs made in the late 1960s and early 70s did not take into cognisance the issue of the needs analysis. Apart from this fact, Zimbabwe then was under colonial rule thus, the first language issue played second fiddle position to that of the second language English. According to Chimhundu (1992). in order to translate the Bible, the different missionary groups developed written forms of the language they heard in the respective regions where they lived. Due to the fact that they were working in isolation from each other, the written language forms they produced were different. According to Terrance Ranger (1989:131-2) quotes a missionary who described the process of translating English into Shona thus,

Talking is a rather slow business as one of us speaks first in English, then John (a Zulu teacher) puts it into Zulu, and then our pupils . . . puts it into Chino (Shona).

This brief description illustrates the arbitrariness used in the scripting process. Most of those who were involved were not even linguists. Yet the different missionary groups defended the language forms they created. This complicated the effort to unify the dialects into a standard form of the language. Doke (1931) devised a Shona writing system that was promoted from 1931 onwards as the 'Union Orthography'. This standard however, did not reflect an equitable distribution of the five dialects. It drew more heavily from some dialects than from others, in particular the Zezuru dialect (Chimhundu 1992). This then would imply that the children from the non Zezuru dialects would be confronted with a tarried kind of language acquisition problem demanding the acquisition of seemingly two languages at a very tender age when they first go to school. Hence, such children fail to benefit from the home –school language as purported by the Education Act of (1987) which encourages the learning of grade 1-3 in their native language. This study therefore made an enquiry into such language problems as contributing to the mechanical passing of English Language at ordinary level and poor English essay writing skills by university students. Thus, the language issues pertinent to the development of the first language seem not to have been attended to in a serious manner. For example, the drastic change that has seen the Shona syllabus from colonial days to date is the elimination of the translation section from both the "O" and the "A" level syllabi. Thus, this lack of seriousness in addressing the first language needs as it were, might be chief among other factors contributing to poor essay writing in second language at university level.

➤ **Statement of the Problem.**

The purpose of this study is to determine whether poor essay writing skills in the second language by university students is a result of the language planning policy and implementation or that of a mere language acquisition complexity that can be experienced by any second language learner that is a non- native English speaker .

➤ **Research Questions.**

- How is the language issue/question a contributory factor to poor essay writing at University level?
- How far can the poor performance in essay writing of the university student be blamed on the issue of attitudes of, parents and teachers (at both primary and secondary school) towards the first language?
- How is the high failure rate at both the secondary and tertiary levels in essay writing can be seen as a result of Corpus and the status planning of Language Policy in Zimbabwe?
- What are the effects of the poor methodology employed by lectures in teaching Communication Skills?
- How much does the Course Outlines Course of the communication Skills exhibit the Needs of the learners by different Universities?

• **JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY.**

The study seeks to answer questions the society at large have and Universities in particular on the poor performance especially a failure in writing convincing English Essays across departments yet the students would have passed English Language at (O) Level Why the Zimbabwean government seems to have promoted English language at both the policy level and the institutional level and whether the seemingly slow but sure dearth with

which the first languages are suffering in Zimbabwe are a direct factor militating against the good performance in Essay writing of the university students.

➤ **Review of the Related Literature.**

Zimbabwe being a multi –lingual society and having lived years of promoting English as a selection criterion, families have embraced a fluid kind of communication, such that children at home are exposed to a mixture of languages at very tender ages. This then might suggest that children go to school without having established one language. It is believed that language as expressed by mother tongue becomes part and parcel of the individual. It is associated with his religious beliefs, but for all, it is associated with the most pristine experience of his conscious life –the first words uttered to him by his mother and the first words he attempted to say in his struggle to gain a mastery of speech. Many have claimed that to deny a child the opportunity to learn through his mother-tongue is to violate the learning process and to throw his mind into confusion. Sir Fredric Clarke observed that to deny a child the use of his mother tongue as his first medium “amounts to a spiritual mutilation of the child”. This observation is true to a child with a firm first language base. For most of the working class parents, most of their communication is characterised by code switching and to a greater extent formal language is used at home as an extension of professional communication. Thus, the child is truly thrown into a linguistically confusing world right from the home. Furthermore, working parents have a tendency of sending their children to pre-school institution at a very early age. Some pre-school take children who are as young as 6 months. These pre-school emphasise on English language learning such that even the sound system /phonetic sounds which bombed the child are alien to the child’s native language. This, then points to the fact that indeed primary socialisation as far as language acquisition is concerned is hampered by a lot of challenges. This then might be the reason why children have not in general developed a firm language base. This according to Volume 7 issue 14 (2006) published online 22 December 2008 --- “the development of colonial and post language policies and practices in Zimbabwe, attributing changes to evolving philosophies and politics in colonial Zimbabwe” thus, the prominence of English can be traced back to the colonial times and the prejudices which comes with the learning of English has mainly to do with the popularisation of the colonial ideology.

Thus, the teaching of the second language like any other language has to take into cognisance of the socio-cultural factors. Along these lines Barrow (1990-1993) observes that language learning is made difficult by the fact that there is a lack of understanding on the part of teacher and student of the amount of cross –cultural learning required.

When it comes to teaching a language, ultimately one teaches the distinctions that are recognised by and are important to those who normally speak the language, one teaches types and ways of reasoning and one most certainly, more indirectly but more specifically, promotes particular substantive values through the materials one uses.

The above observation seems to have been put to effect in the designing of the Communications Skills at a number of universities in Zimbabwe. However, the extent to which this has been adopted seems to be defeating the purpose with which the language is to be put to effect. On the same note, Zvavanhuchopper.blogspot.com/2010/blog-post2579.htm Language Policy dictates that all the instructions in the education system must be in specific usages for learners to learn so that they become responsible citizens. The essence for language learning here is not for any other purposes but for students to abide by the law. English being the language for education and Law thus students are supposed to understand it for them to maintain a just society devoid of criminals. Language learning thus, according to Zvavanhu is not a matter of linguistically development but an issue for maintaining order and stability in a society ruled by the align language.

Thus, lecturers of Communication Skills need to be aware of the value system they are promoting in order to be sensitive to the changes they are requiring of their students. Lecturers also need to be aware of socio cultural background of their students. Thus, English language teaching seems to be requiring special attention since it is being taught to generally a people without a language. This study thus, sought to investigate whether the teaching of the English language is consistent with expectations of the subject. Would this move invariably promote a better understanding of the language and thus, boost the level of competence in English essay writing for university students?.

Language policy according to Crawford (2006) shown on www.ourworldcompterean (2010):

What government does officially through legislation, court decisions, executive action or other means to determine how languages are used in public contexts(b) cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or (c) establish the rights of individuals or groups to learn ,use and maintain languages.

The definition highlights the fact that language is a right and where and how it is used will affect individuals and groups in society. The position of English and that of the first languages in Zimbabwe have indeed negative social and political connotations. If anything has to be said what position would Shona take as compared to English?. Thus, according to Weinstein (1989) the reason why a language policy is determined is to save

political, social and economical purposes and these purposes invariably affect individuals and groups in society. The way, for example, people respond to language policy is how language is currently used and given prominence. How then is English used in terms of benefits to those that would have exhibited proficiency?

Modern education has encouraging stronger links between the home and the school: movements such as the Home and the School Associations have urged the schools to reach out to the family and for the family to make greater contact with the home and the school. The school is said to be an extension of the home. Thus, in this study the extension in terms of home language and school language might need to be established.

This research like what has been alluded to earlier on is meant to make an enquiry into the poor performance of the university students in essay writing as an issue arising from the language policy used in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe however, does not have an official language policy document. The legal status of language is stipulated in the 1987 Education Act. According to this Act, English is the official language and Shona and IsiNdebele are National languages with restricted official use. In addition five of the minority languages are recognised by the government. This means that THEY CAN BE USED AS MEDIA OF INSTRUCTION FOR THE FIRST THREE YEARS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION. From this observation it is clear that the implementation of the policy is not mandatory yet the psychologists and educationists concur on the issue of making the school an extension of the home thus, for language proficiency it is prudent to allow the child to develop their first language so as to facilitate the acquisition of the other languages. It can be argued that a seemingly weak language base in terms of the first language might negatively impact on the proper assimilation of the second language thereby resulting in the poor performance in English. The five other national languages that can be used for the first grade are Kalanga, Tonga, Vemba, Shangani, and Nambya. Chewa also known as Nyanja is also officially recognised for use on radio, but not in schools.

English is the primary language of most government sectors. In the legislature and judiciary, English is used in writing and promulgating laws. It is the authorised language for court proceedings and translations are used for those who are not conversant with English. It is the language primarily used in parliament debates. Over and above this, English is used as a selection criterion for furthering ones education or entering the job market, therefore it is mandatory for one to pass it at "O" Level to realise their dreams. Having passed it at this level it is presumed that one is now in a position to converse and express one's self in this language it is behind this background that this research is fashioned the issue being that it is disturbing for one to fail to express oneself and thus, warrant inquiry. This research is therefore trying to get to identify among others the militating factors against the poor performance in essay writing for the university graduates.

Language is a sensitive issue in a multilingual society, Zimbabwe being among such societies, where, the issue of language choice becomes an important matter, evident in problems requiring a language solution, thus, the language question arises. The language choice relates to the selection of one language or more, over other languages. This is a choice that the political leadership must make in multi lingual societies since it is often impractical to use all the languages in all spheres of activities in any given country. Education, for example, is one sphere of activity that affects a large section of the population. Thus, this study sought to make an analysis of the academic problems inherent in the learning of both the first languages and the second language what are some of the reasons behind the low pass rate of these languages and why would one pass a subject that they fail to express themselves in when it comes to essay writing at university level.

Textbooks and other resources must be made available in the languages, of education. The language question is currently a tropical issue in the drafting of the constitution. Language is seen by many as a key aspect of communication. It can either bring people together or set them apart. Without a shared language people would not be able to interact effectively with each other. Language helps to shape one's world view. Through language one assimilates a culture, a system of meaning and way of reasoning and viewing the world. Through language we can name the world (Freire 1972). We name the world by assigning names and labels that help us to understand:

- The things around us that are an important part of our lives
- The feelings and emotions within us, and
- The things that are not an immediate part of our society but enter our world from other society.
- Language is a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Language plays an important role in defining who we are, both in terms of identity and culture. As an aspect of identity, ones mother tongue, or language of primary socialisation, provides ones contact with the world and facilitates the formulation of values and our view of us. It reinforces ones self-concepts and ones perceptions of others within a multifaceted social order. In the case of Zimbabwe, whose identity is carried in the language used in schools and at home during the first contacts of the children with language? The issue of the position of the first languages in the Zimbabwean Society seems to affect the way languages are treated both at home and at school.

NgugiwaThiong'o (1986) defines culture as an accumulated fund and resources base of humankind. Culture is constructed by religion and belief systems, customs and mores, language and other aspects of human ingenuity (Prah 1995). The development of a cultural group is imprinted in its language.

Having observed this, one would wonder then why in Zimbabwe, English seems to be enjoying popularity as compared to the first languages? With its popularity one would assume that the language is thus being understood by many since homes have tended to embrace the language more and denigrate the first language. The language policy to a greater extent seems to be influencing the way language is being handled in Zimbabwe. Choosing one language over others is basically undermining the cultural base of those languages which are not chosen. Thus, this might be one among many other reasons why the Zimbabwean first languages are not being passed so well and this inversely affecting the way English is taught and handled at secondary schools this seems to be falling short of encouraging bilingualism at all levels of education and thus, affect university students competence in second language essay writing.

• THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study makes use of the why, how, what, who, where and when framework of analysis. The Needs Analysis has been adopted to determine the supposed needs to be addressed by the Communication Skills course designers at different universities in Zimbabwe.

The study also adopted the Course Design approach in collaboration with the curriculum development where the information from Evaluation, both the Summative and the Formative Evaluation is needed in designing a course which address the language needs of the learners at both levels.

The study also took in to consideration language planning models such as the Canonical model, Haugen's Classical model and Kloss's Framework. Language Policy Formulation and implementation procedures had also been used to authenticate the feasibility of the language policy decision. Procedures such as Fact finding, Descriptive and Exploratory studies had also been explored.

• METHODOLOGY

There are a number of ways in which information can be gathered about needs. The most frequently used are the questionnaires, interviews, observation, and data collection for example, the statistical figures of communication skills students. This study is basically a qualitative approach to an enquiry which tends to be holistic in nature. The research recorded to a greater extent narratives in their raw state for changing narratives to variables eliminate the holistic nature of the approach. Observations and participatory observation by way of visiting institutions of Higher learning where Shona is taught to student and teachers has been undertaken. Observations in Schools on how documentary analysis is undertaken in the form of analysis of the language policy document, the Course outlines for both university communications skills students and Student teachers and Shona and English School syllabi for selected schools was carried out.

FINDINGS AS BASIS FOR DISCUSSION

Year 2012 first semester for the academic year starting in August saw about 1035 communication students being offered the course Communication Skills for Academic Purposes (P.C.103). The catchment area for B.U.S.E. can be better described as the whole country. Thus, students of various linguistic abilities where given an opportunity to show case their linguistic abilities in essay writing and comprehension answering. The researcher managed to mark 587 assignments and 448 assignments where marked by the co-researcher, 389 examination scripts where marked by the researcher while the co-researcher marked 320 which in any case is more than what Cohen and Manion (1982), purport to be a representative sample about 10% of the target population. Of the students whom assignments where marked the following observations where made:

Total Number of students who wrote	1035	Student who scored 50+	49	60+	75+
Assignment 1	1035	700	205	122	18
Assignment 2	1035	746	139	164	36
In Class	1035	500	325	180	30
Examination scripts marked	1035	480	497	050	08
Total number of passes	596	538	439	050	08
Total number of average students	538	538	-	-	-
Total number of failures	439	-	-	-	-

The above statistics show the scores attained by the communications students of the year 2012 first semester. Total number of the students who failed the examination is 439 after a rigorous semester characterised by total

Shona/Ndebele to English. By so doing the children develop a weak kind of codes which save their coined communicative purposes in informal kind of a set up like the home but still being in a position to not so effectively expressing themselves clearly. It is a far much better situation if it can be compared to the rural students who are far from familiarising their communication with the formal code of communication. The puzzling issue however is the fact that all those who pursue tertiary education would have passed English at "O" Level therefore it would be given that they would do well in expressing themselves in essay writing at a higher level that is at the university level. Thus, the research had an analysis of both the "O" Level syllabus and the Zimbabwe Schools Examination results of rural schools and urban schools. From the analysis it was observed that rural schools are at a disadvantage for most of the students pass after several trials; the headmasters interviewed expressed the sentiments that most of the students lack the basics in second language. They emphasised the fact that such students lack resources to aid them in the learning of language. The support brought forth by the UNICEF Program has bridged the gap to a larger extent in as far as books are concerned for the purposes of learning English. It is however recommended that a Needs Analysis be instituted so that books would be designed in a way to address the linguistic needs of the rural students in as far as English language needs are concerned. A universal approach to exam designing, seem to be marginalising the rural children. Apart from this fact the rural students have limited contact with the English language for it is chiefly at school that English is spoken yet their urban counterparts speak it at home since most of the interviewed parents seem to support the fact that they can engage in fluid conversation at home in English with their children who might be very young. Thus, it has been observed that parents tend to have an extension of the formal language they use at the work place when they go home. This thus, gives such student better ground for practice with the second language. In typical rural areas, the codes that have developed are far much removed from the codes that are normally used in formal Shona/Ndebele/English. Apart from this social network, platforms have enabled fast movement of information and in most cases the information that does the rounds is in English therefore, those that can afford the type of technology are mostly situated in urban areas and thus are at an advantage in as far as having contact with the second language is concerned. An insignificant number of rural students have such advantages. Not to mention the multi-media advancement in technology. The internet has brought with it a new face of learning together with a sizable number of some other advancement in technologies which aids the acquisition of English ranging from films, news, to music, dance and adverts all these in a way encourage the acquisition of English. Thus, the playground is not level in as far as the schools national examinations are concerned.

Looking at the "O" Level syllabus, the way English language is marked promotes a certain group of children and again does not promote an understanding of the Language as per say but the passing of the subject as it is a necessity for one to either further their education or enter the job market. For the composition paper instead of students exhibiting creativity they are trained to answer certain types of compositions and in a certain way. For example normally question number 1 is a descriptive of phenomenon to be chosen such that students would be drilled into answering such composition to the extent of being given a model composition that can be crammed and then be changed according to the dictates of the examination. Question 2 is on narratives the same approach is used where one model answer is used and then can be implemented in various adjustments. This was typical of the visited schools. Teachers had model compositions emphasising the drills as part of their teaching aids. Apart from this fact, students were encouraged to use the Green Sport for model composition answers

Paper two is equally prepared for the examination answering where students are prepared to answer comprehension passages by identifying or picking answers from lines that are specified. Elimination of possible wrong answer can be a training aspect. Thus, students can pick on a correct answer without difficulty and having no understanding of the whole passage. This can be said of summary writing, summaries at "O" Level are mere reproductions of the original text. Thus, the fact that students are supposed not to even add cohesive devices goes to support reduplication of the text as it is rather than paraphrasing to show an in depth understanding of the issues discussed in the text. The only component that sought for student's linguistic competence seems to be the registers section of which the section is known to be done very badly yet the marking is relaxed on the section. The student can give any number of responses and the examiner is supposed to examine all the possible answers and award a mark for the correct answer. This seems to promote guess work among students and again the students are encouraged by their teachers to write as many possible answers as they can per every response thus, the aspect of guess work cannot be dismissed in as far as this section is concerned. The insight that were given through various discussion forums has to a certain extent helped in explaining the level of incompetence with which essay writing is characteristic of university students.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus, it has been observed that there is limited language competence learning in schools, and again the schools and the homes are lacking in as far as promoting first language is concerned. It is also imperative that the language policy makers be encouraged to institute provincial corpus planning for the first language so as to encourage the home-school link. The languages of the land that is the indigenous languages should be given an

economic incentive as a way among many of encouraging students and parents to develop a positive attitude towards the languages. If first languages are handled in a way that would encourage multilingualism that in essence would indirectly promote competence in second language.

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