
Original Paper

Zimbabwean Language Policy – Panacea for Linguistic Equality and Equity or a Perpetuation of Colonial Language Hegemony?

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Abstract

This paper reviewed the Zimbabwean language policies over the years with the view to establishing whether language equity and equality are an achievable dream with English language on the one hand and indigenous languages on the other. It emerged that many language policies were put in place – from the Judges Commission of 1962 to the New Curriculum Framework (2015-2022) currently under implementation. Despite some of the post-colonial policies looking so revolutionary on paper, most of them suffered a still birth at implementation stage such that the English language still enjoys (more or less) its pre-independence privileged position. The New Curriculum Framework currently under implementation seems to take little cognisance of the need to level the linguistic playing field in order to achieve language equity and equality. Overall, there is need for concerted efforts at policy level, complemented by commitment at implementation stage, the latter which calls for a total attitude overhaul on the part of classroom practitioners.

Keywords: language hegemony, language equity, mental decolonisation, language bastardisation

Introduction

English has become one of the most dominant languages used in business, commerce and education world-wide (Rao, 2019; Neeley, 2012). In Zimbabwe, argues Ngara (in Ngara and Morrison, 1989), English is an official language, developed as a literary language and operates as a language of technology as well as a language of religion. Moore (1969:ix) correctly observes that “[i]n Africa and Asia it became...the language of government, of higher education and, more important still, of higher status.” In Zimbabwe, like in other former British colonies, English has tended to eclipse the indigenous local languages to the dismay of locals whose culture is equally endangered with the said dominance. There have been a number of policies and counter policies addressing the language situation from as far back as the Report of the Southern Rhodesia Education Commission of 1962 (popularly known as the Judges Commission) right up to the Report of the Presidential of Inquiry into Education and Training of 1999 (known as the Nziramasanga Commission). Also of note, is the cosmetic attempt to address the said anomalous situation in the Zimbabwean “new curriculum” currently under implementation.

Language equality and equity

In general, the terms equality and equity are often used interchangeably. Ipso facto, Barnhart (2014) notes that the two words are similar because they both come from the same Latin root word “aequus” meaning “equal”. In equity, the outcome is equal. Interestingly, Adhikari (2017) opines that equity is positive discrimination, that is, proportional representation according to need. Equality is measurable and justifies things on the basis of quantity. The insistence on equal number of periods for English language and other indigenous languages speaks to language equality, as if that is going to be the panacea to language equity. A typical scenario of language inequity is the traditional English only environment by former group A schools where non-English first language speakers are disadvantaged but especially, local languages risk extinction, at least in the lives of local students.

However, before we delve into the assessment of the extent to which the current language policy encourages language equality and equity, there arises a need to lay a firm theoretical foundation by

exploring the general role of a language to a nation.

Theoretical underpinnings

Ngugi wa Thio'ngo's stance on language is as revolutionary as it is true when he argues that

[i]t is the aspect which has made nations and peoples take up arms to prevent total annihilation or assimilation of their languages, because it is tantamount to annihilating that people's collective memory bank of past achievements and failures which form the basis of their common identity (Ngugi, 1980:60)

He goes on to argue, later, that language is defined by its dual function as a means of communication and as a carrier of culture (Ngugi, 1981). If language is this important to a nation, there is, therefore, an urgent need to formulate a language policy that is reflective of such importance.

Some people have argued that English has a cordial relationship with other local languages. However, Crystal (1987) proposes that "a world language would inevitably erode the status of minority languages and pose a threat to the identity of nations" (357). English is indeed an international language which is potentially injurious to the identity of Africans, hence the need to be particular about language policy. To further authenticate these fears, Hofman (1977) interviewed Zimbabwean university students and observed that their feelings for their own languages were a mixture of sentimental attachment, guilt and concern because

Some students felt guilty either because they no longer spoke the language properly or because they neglected learning it at school since there was no instrumental value attached to it. They therefore felt as if they had betrayed not only their language, but their culture and their group as a whole. Others felt concern for the future of their language because of the perceived threat of the dominance of English (224).

These fears were not unfounded as evidenced by general erosion of culture coming through in disrespecting parents, code-switching and code-mixing among other linguistic 'vices' which are both scandalous and scurrilous. This necessitates a brief investigation into the language policy over the years.

A synopsis of the Zimbabwean (formerly Rhodesian) language policies over decades

Pre-independence language policies

As would be expected of the colonial period, the oppressor's policy would reveal his ideology, that is, linguistic (and, by extension, cultural) domination. A typical segregationist, racist and oppressive policy is the Judges' Commission's recommendation that "the problem of how to introduce the use of simple flexible English, clearly enunciated, at the earliest possible moment in both urban and rural primary schools" (paragraph 218). This misguided commission came up with the proposal that English should be taught as a universally permeating subject (paragraph 226). Furthermore, the 1962 Hope Fountain Experiment by Mr. W.G. mcd. Partridge (the principal) to employ English instruction from the first grade was a clear attempt to "infant baptise" the African child into the English language (and culture). The colonial zeal is glaring in the experiment's final recommendation that

An English sector of the curriculum could be prescribed for such say English –medium instruction in writing, arithmetic, P.T. and handwork. Such reforms would seem to be urgent and imperative... (Partridge, 1962).

There was no way this situation could promote equity and equality between English and the indigenous languages. This takes us to the language policies that came up with the advent of black majority rule at independence in 1980.

Post-independence language policies

In 1981, the newly elected black majority government quickly made giant strides in trying to uplift the indigenous languages, especially ChiShona and IsiNdebele (hereinafter Shona and Ndebele). A full O level certificate was defined as having five passes at grade C or better, including a language. "This raised the status of ChiShona and IsiNdebele to that of English" (Nziramasanga, 1999:158). This meant

that the importance given to English was going to be the same with indigenous languages. The status and prestige previously bestowed on English was a thing of the past. However, this linguistic honeymoon was short-lived when, suddenly, an about turn in language policy was made, due to pressure from tertiary colleges and conservative educationists. Now, a full certificate was supposed to include a pass in the English language! By so doing, this retrogressive policy effectively restored the pre-independence language scenario.

Another attempt came in 1987 when a language bill was enacted. This act states language of minority groups comprising TshiKalanga, TshiVenda, ChiTonga, ChiTshangana and ChiNambya were recognised and introduced in schools. In relation to Shona and Ndebele, it explicitly states that, prior to the fourth grade, either Shona or Ndebele may be used as a medium of instruction... but “from the fourth grade, 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” (the Education Act, chapter 62, paragraphs 2&3). The use of modals ‘may’ and ‘shall’ speaks volumes about the attitude of the policy makers. If Shona and Ndebele ‘may’ be media of instruction while English ‘shall’ be the medium of instruction, the implication is that indigenous language instruction is optional whereas English instruction is mandatory. A similar observation is made by experts (in Nziramasanga 1999:160) that the “interpretation and implementation of the provisions of the Education Act of 1987 in the school system is confused and half-hearted in respect of both the national and the official minority languages.” The result is that English remained the undisputed medium of instruction in education.

One interesting observation is that a policy that compels pupils to use English as a medium of instruction from the fourth grade is as good as saying that from that level onwards, they are free to totally jettison their culture in preference to the English one. The argument of this paper is that all subjects, save for English subject itself, should be instructed in the child’s mother tongue. While this stance sounds hyperbolically revolutionary, its feasibility is probable, considering what is happening elsewhere, as we shall see later. The defenders of the status quo will rush to cite financial implications for designing a curriculum with a local image. Nothing can be further from the truth, considering that a lot of funds are being misused and abused in government, as evidenced by many a corruption scandal running into billions of United States dollars, the money which could be channelled towards such a noble cause. If Cuba, for example, has Spanish as its medium of communication, how therefore, does Zimbabwe fail? If there was political will in the government, at least one subject could have been taught in the local languages up to advanced level, forty years after independence. If, at independence in 1980, a policy had been put in place radically addressing the language situation proposing, for example, that every ten years one subject is developed for indigenous instruction, then by the golden anniversary in 2030, at least half of the curriculum would have been vernacularized. Regrettably, this academic tragedy is far too widespread to fathom, especially in Africa so much that Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s call for the need for mental decolonisation sounds most appropriate.

Furthermore, the Nziramasanga Commission rightly notices that, besides being taught indirectly in all other subjects except Shona and Ndebele, English enjoys far more periods on the time table despite policy stipulation that all languages have to be taught on equal time basis. Proponents of this educational decadence would try, albeit in vain, to justify this folly by arguing that, after all, the child has all the day practising his vernacular outside the classroom yet English is a ‘new’ language and pretty foreign to the learner hence the need for more time table frequency to facilitate practice. Such an argument is as naïve as it is simplistic. In the Zimbabwean case, what is more devastating is that Shona and Ndebele are the majority languages yet they suffer the onslaught of a colonial language most of whose native speakers have since left the country for their motherland (England). Under the prevailing circumstances, the very identity of Zimbabwe as a nation and sovereign state is under serious threat. It is high time the third world in general, and Africa in particular, woke up and sobered up from the colonial hang-over of colonial language domination in the curriculum.

A disturbing observation in the Zimbabwean education policy is the reluctance and half-hearted commitment in its implementation. The snail-slow pace of implementing the Nziramasanga 1999 recommendations so much that seven years after the Commission, in 2006, the government adopted some of the commission’s recommendations in the Circular P77 which allows vernacular instruction up to form two level [second year of secondary education]. However, the irony of this circular is that it

remains silent on how these subjects will be examined. It is clear that the said subjects continue to be examined in the English language, despite the examinations themselves having been localised for about two decades now. From the foregoing, it is clear that the challenge is no longer financial but it is likely to be political will as well as die hard attitudes. The implementers themselves were educated in an anglicised curriculum hence their reluctance to change. Besides that, reality on the ground shows that circular P77 was largely ignored since tradition runs the show, with English still enjoying dominance in the Zimbabwean curriculum.

On the other hand, there are a number of residual critics who justify the privileged position of English over local languages in educational instruction and any other domains on the notion that our own variety of English is now so localised that it now generally transmits our culture. Such an argument is premised on Achebe's mistaken view on language that

Colonialism in Africa disrupted many things but it gave a language for us with which to communicate to one another. If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue for sighing.... I felt that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my experience, but it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings (Achebe, 1996).

Nothing could be further from the truth, for the same remains English anyway. This 'poor' bastardised version of the English language will likely inculcate an equally poor version of the English culture and thus, nowhere near the African culture.

On a positive note, the banning of the use of the English language in attempting Advanced level Shona/Ndebele paper 2 in 2001 is an attempt to reduce or curtail the privileged position of English. The latter's intrusion, right into the Shona/Ndebele subjects, was a mark of cultural erosion having reached fever pitch. Such was a conscious attempt to totally annihilate the local languages. The reversal of that dangerous state of affairs is a cause for relief. However, this move can only be the beginning and much more needs to be done to repair the cultural damage English is callously perpetrating against, especially, the African youth. It is disturbing to hear young people professing inability to write letters or any other document in vernacular. Most of them are in the bad habit of code switching and code mixing, even during sacred moments like worship! It is this canker, this pestilence that is infecting and threatening our local languages that makes it urgent for the government not only to plan an equitable language policy but to ensure that it is implemented effectively.

Sadly, a number of the Nziramasanga Commission recommendations are largely ignored. For instance, recommendations 6.15 to 6.18 which, inter alia, advocate for the establishment of a National Language Council, a Research and Documentation Language Centre, the resuscitation of the Literature Bureau and the establishment of the School Publication Services. These special departments would ensure effective implementation of any language policy. The reason why the English language remains by far more privileged in reality than in actual policy is half-hearted implementation at best and outright resistance at its worst.

The new curriculum and linguistic equity

The new curriculum framework continues to parrot the old song of indigenous language instruction at infant level thus: "learners achieve mastery of language through the mother tongue as the medium of instruction" (32). However, it is yet to be seen whether such an ideal scenario is merely theoretical, considering what Gatawa (in Ndamba, 2010) observes: "In spite of the benefits offered by learning in the mother tongue, Infant teachers in Zimbabwe rarely use Shona or Ndebele as a medium of instruction up to Grade three"(143). If no monitoring mechanism is put in place by the new curriculum, then the vicious cycle continues unabated. As long as there is no willingness to change, the indigenous languages will always be at the receiving end and thus rendering the language equity mantra a pipe dream.

Ironically, the new curriculum seems to gloss over the language issue by and large, as if it is a trivial issue without realising that it is in fact the fulcrum of the whole curriculum. For instance, at one point, it seems to glorify the linguistic status quo by observing that "the learning of English and its use as a language plays a vital role in the development of literacy in that it enhances learning in other areas of

the curriculum.” That being the case, the fate of indigenous languages remains hanging in the balance, hence the language equality-equity remains generally gloom despite the so-called new curriculum that seems to bring nothing new as far as levelling linguistic playing field is concerned. This is in sync with other studies such as Ndamba’s that found that generally perceptions and attitudes were negative, indicating that respondents were mainly in favour of the use of English as the language of instruction in the infant grades (Ndamba, 2010:254). Until such a time when there is an overhaul of these attitudes, the curriculum remains skewed in favour of the English language over Shona, Ndebele and other indigenous languages.

Conclusion

Overall, it can be noted that more than four decades into independence English remains the official language mostly in use in education instruction, business and commerce and many other spheres. We have vehemently argued here against English’s presumed neutrality and its imagined unifying role as mere excuses to perpetuate cultural imperialism. It has also been established that a number of efforts have been made to level the playing field for languages in Zimbabwe at policy level, most of which have suffered a still birth because of lack of full commitment on both policy makers and implementers. We have commended the recent recognition of minority languages, especially Tonga which can now be examined at Grade seven level, with the launching of a textbook series in November 2008 to facilitate this noble enterprise. The 2015 “new curriculum” currently tottering in its implementation, has little (if any) potential to improve language equity and equality in the maligned (sanctioned) nation of Zimbabwe. Finally, it can be concluded that whilst we acknowledge the efforts made to promote language equity and equality in Zimbabwe, more needs to be done at policy level but also especially at implementation. Otherwise the education system, industry and commerce, judiciary, executive, legislature, media, science and technology among many other spheres remain largely Anglicised.

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