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Shona Speaking Teachers' Experiences on Mother Tongue Education Policy Implementation in Minority Language Schools in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
Mother Tongue Education (MTE), despite being the most reliable method of learning, is a challenge for the African countries that fail to implement MTE policies due to lack of resources, stakeholders' attitudes towards mother tongues, and lack of political will. Keeping in view the plight of the primary implementers of such policies, hence, this study examines how early childhood Shona-speaking teachers' experiences impact on the implementation of Shangani as the medium of instruction in three schools in Zimbabwe's Chiredzi District. A multiple case study design employing observations and semi-structured interviews with ten purposively sampled Shona-speaking teachers were used to collect data. A thematic approach was involved in analyzing the data which indicated that Shona speaking teachers lack proficiency in the Shangani Language, resulting in untold suffering while they try to impart knowledge to learners. There is also communication breakdown in their classrooms as they cannot speak the learners' language. When they try to use the few Shangani terms that they know, they make mistakes and are laughed at by learners. As a result of these experiences, the implementation of Shangani as the language of instruction in three schools is adversely affected. It is recommended that the government makes an effort to ensure that early childhood learners in this minority section are taught by teachers who can speak their language for meaningful learning to occur. A major limitation of this study was that it only focused on one minority language in Zimbabwe. Further research can focus on the experience of teachers teaching in minority language schools to ascertain how it impacts MTE policy implementation.

Keywords: Implementation, Minority Language, Mother Tongue Education, Mother Tongue.

Introduction

The most reliable method for promoting the acquisition of educational knowledge, particularly at the early childhood level, is Mother Tongue Education (MTE) (UNESCO, 1953). A majority of African learners can speak only their mother tongue when they first start school. A child's learning may suffer if a different language is used as the Medium of Instruction (MOI). According to research, "...using a language other than their mother tongue as the language of education can have a negative influence on children's learning process," (Saeed, 2021). Kioko et al. (2014), too, remark that, "Empirical studies from both developed and developing countries show that pupils who have a home language other than the language of instruction have lower levels of attainment and achievement, and experience higher dropout rates." As they attempt to

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adapt to the educational system, learners, thus, struggle to understand the topics presented in a foreign language. This emphasizes the importance of mother tongue instruction.

African governments have responded to the call for MTE by enacting policies that seem to favor the use of local languages in education. For instance, in Botswana, at Standard One, English is taught as a subject, while Setswana is the recommended language of instruction. English becomes the primary language of instruction at Standard Two, with Setswana being taught as a subject (Republic of Botswana, 1994). It is assumed that by the time they reach Standard Two, learners will have acquired the English language to enable them to learn other subjects. Whether this is true or not, is a discussion for another day but suffice it to say that the Botswana language in education policy acknowledges the importance of the mother tongue by making it the medium of instruction at Standard One level when learners enter the school system. In South Africa, the medium of instruction (MOI), or the language of learning and teaching, must be an official language of the country. South Africa has eleven official languages and any one of them can be used as the MOI in schools (Department of Basic Education, 2010). This shows that the South African Language in Education Policy endeavors to facilitate meaningful acquisition of educational knowledge by the young learners through the use of languages that they are familiar with.

Nigeria is another nation that has included MTE in its policies. Moving away from the long-held stance that only Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa should be recognized as languages of instruction at the primary school level (Fafunwa, 1974), the 2013 revised National Policy on Education recommends the use of indigenous languages in Primary 1 through Primary 3. According to this policy: "The medium of instruction shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years in monolingual communities. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French and Arabic shall be taught as subjects (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). It is encouraging to see that the language of the learners' immediate environment is being acknowledged, and if it is put into practice, it may have a beneficial effect on how these historically marginalized populations learn.

Similar to other neighborhood nations, Zimbabwe has worked to acknowledge indigenous languages. The 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe recognizes 16 indigenous languages, including English (formerly the only official language of Zimbabwe), Shona, Ndebele (National Languages), Chewa, Shangani, Tonga, Hwesa, Chikunda, Sotho, Xhosa, Sena, Tshwawo, Barwe, Venda, Kalanga, Nambya, and Tswana (minority languages), which are among the approximately 17 languages spoken in Zimbabwe. In 2020, the 2006 Education Amendment Act was amended to bring the Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) into line with the constitution. Section 62 of the 2006 Education Act was repealed in the following way by Section 12 of the Amended Education Act of 2020: 1) Every school shall endeavor to—(a) teach every officially recognized language, (b) ensure that the language of instruction shall be the language of examination, (c) ensure that the mother tongue is to be used as a medium of instruction at early childhood education. (2) School curricula shall as far as possible to reflect the culture of the people of every language used or taught in terms of this section. (3) The use of any language in terms of subsections (1) and (2) shall be subject to—(a) the availability of resources to the State for giving effect to these provisions; and (b) the availability of teachers, examiners, textbooks and other educational materials necessary for instruction in and of any of the languages.

An encouraging trend is the amendment act's recommendation to employ the mother tongue in early childhood education, namely from ECD A to Grade 3 (in Zimbabwe). Interestingly, Section 12, sub-section (3)b states that all of the information stated in the first two sub-sections is contingent upon the availability of teachers, examiners, textbooks, and other resources required for education in the referenced languages. The paucity of teachers who can speak minority languages raises concerns about what happens to young learners who might end up in the hands of a teacher who does not speak their language.

Studies have been conducted on the Zimbabwean LiEP but they have not examined the experiences of Shona-speaking teachers teaching in Shangani-speaking schools. For example, Ndamba (2013) examined language preferences for parents and learners; Gotosa, Rwodzi, & Mhlanga (2013) critically examined the use of mother tongues in Zimbabwean schools; and Hang'ombe & Mumpande (2023) examined the language situation and language policy in-education in Zimbabwe with specific reference to Tonga learners. These studies did not delve into the actual classroom experiences of teachers who cannot speak minority languages but find themselves teaching minority language learners, yet these experiences may be an important factor in understanding the implementation of MTE policies. Hence, an investigation into the teachers' experiences was necessary to illuminate the implications of MTE policy implementation in such situations. The purpose of this work is to close this gap.

Problem Statement

Although it is commendable that Zimbabwe has officially recognized 16 local languages, it is regrettable that the LiEP states that certain languages can only be used as teaching languages when teachers who are

fluent in the language are available (Ministry of Education, 2020). This, however, does not change the fact that early childhood learners will come to school in their quest for knowledge and find a teacher waiting for them but the question is: What language does the teacher speak? Similarly, one wonders what the teachers will do with 40 to 50 learners in their classes who speak a language that they do not understand. In cases where learners have not yet acquired English, which is the recommended medium of teaching beyond the early childhood level, it also raises concerns about the classroom experiences of teachers who do not speak the languages of the learners.

The mother tongue has been identified as the most reliable medium through which learning can occur especially in the learners' early school years. Many African countries have promulgated policies that seem to support mother tongue education, but research has shown that implementation of such policies has been difficult due to lack of material and human resources, stakeholders' attitudes towards indigenous languages and a general lack of commitment by governments to support such policies (Magwa, 2015; Ndamba, 2013). Lack of human resources leads to situations where teachers find themselves teaching learners whose languages they cannot speak.

Hence, this paper intends to establish actual classroom experiences of early childhood teachers who find themselves in such scenarios and how their experiences affect MTE policy implementation. Specifically, Shona teachers' experiences in teaching Shangani speaking elementary level learners was the point of focus in this study. This research aimed to establish how Shona early childhood teachers' classroom experiences impact on the implementation of MTE in minority language classrooms in Zimbabwe. Specifically, this study framed two objectives: to unearth the classroom experiences of Shona-speaking early childhood teachers in Shangani-speaking schools; and to establish the impact of their experiences on MTE policy implementation.

Literature Review

Factors Affecting MTE Policy Implementation

Improving learning outcomes requires using the learners' first language (L1) as a channel for knowledge access (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2004, 2016; Obanya, 1987; Wagner, 2017). Since the majority of learners may not have attained proficiency in the English language (or any other language) when they enter school, they should receive education in their native tongues, particularly at the elementary/early childhood levels. For this reason, from the very beginning of school until the very end of education, UNESCO (1953) and its later publications have maintained that the learners' first language (L1) should be the language of instruction. The implementation of MTE policies is still a challenge in various African nations, even though research has shown that using the mother tongue has many advantages, including better teacher-learner communication (Alidou et al., 2006), increased learner participation (Benson, 2004), which promotes learner-dominated classrooms instead of teacher-dominated ones where learners memorize and repeat information (Alidou et al., 2006). For instance, Kangira (2016) notes that English dominates as an official language in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Malawi, Swaziland and Lesotho. English has become the dominant language in classrooms in these countries due to its official status. This is true even though the policies of these nations appear to encourage MTE.

According to Kangira (2016), the implementation of MTE policies has been hampered in many African developing nations by a lack of material and human resources. For instance, studies have revealed a severe shortage of material and human resources in Zimbabwe (Hang'ombe & Mumpande, 2023; Ndamba, 2013). Although these studies highlight that teachers are made to teach learners who speak different languages from their own, they do not explore the real classroom experiences of these teachers or how those experiences affect the implementation of MTE policies. The colonial history of Africa has caused many instructors to have unfavorable opinions about African languages. This is another prevalent reason that has prevented MTE policies from being implemented throughout Africa. According to Katabe & Tibategeza (2023), colonialism devalued African languages relative to the languages of the colonial masters. African nations were categorized as Lusophone, Francophone, and Anglophone, thus relegating African languages for use in informal communication with friends and family. Many teachers in Zimbabwe and beyond still have the colonial hangover, believing that if these former colonial masters' languages are not used in education, no meaningful learning can occur. According to them, African languages are not suitable for use as teaching languages, particularly when it comes to teaching the sciences (Ndamba, 2013). Due to this colonial heritage, English is valued more highly than local African languages, and instructors in these nations generally have unfavorable opinions about using the L1 as the primary language of instruction. This paper aims to establish whether or not this is the case with regard to the use of Shangani as the language of instruction in Zimbabwe's three Shangani speaking schools.

In many African nations, MTE policies have not been implemented in part due to a lack of political will to support them. According to Norro (2022), Namibia's attempts to provide L1 instruction at the senior primary level have failed because of a lack of political will. Since, they are the ones with access to the former

colonial masters' languages, Kangira (2016) claims that the majority of post-colonial African governments have purposefully encouraged the use of these languages in order to keep a distance between themselves and the general populace. In most cases, they do this subtly, for example, by maintaining the former colonial masters' language as the language of examinations. This can cause teachers to abandon the MTE policy for the English language. Thus, lack of political will can contribute to the experiences of teachers in the implementation of MTE policies.

Although many academics have expressed concern that teaching learners in a foreign language hinders acquisition of educational knowledge (Benson, 2009; Brock-Utne, 2000; Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010), implementation of MTE policies in many African countries is still a challenge. As highlighted earlier in this discussion, researchers have concentrated on problems like lack of human and material resources, lack of political will to support MTE, and teachers' attitudes towards the use of local languages in the classroom, among other factors. However, they have not addressed the real-world experiences of teachers who speak a language other than the learners' and how these experiences affect them. Therefore, a study to fill this vacuum was required to determine the influence of these experiences on the implementation of MTE policy. In order to address the issue, this paper specifically addresses whether or not the experiences of early childhood Shona teachers impact the way L1 instruction is implemented in the three Shangani minority language schools in Zimbabwe.

Teachers' experiences on MTE policy implementation

A study by Magno, Suerte, & Embang (2024) revealed that when teachers and learners speak the same mother tongue, teachers have personal enjoyment as their experiences of MTE policy implementation are positive. Teachers in their study found ease in using Bisaya as the medium of instruction as they could express ideas clearly in the language that learners could easily comprehend. One of the participating teachers indicated that 'it's a pleasant overall experience' to teach through the learners L1. However, Magno et al. (2024) highlight that some classrooms, though few, were multilingual and teachers found it difficult to translate concepts into the languages of learners who did not speak Bisaya. This caused a lot of stress among teachers as they had to go an extra mile to help these learners. Overall, implementation of Bisaya as the medium of instruction was possible because teachers' experiences were positive. Cansino et al. (2022) conducted a study in the Philippines and findings of their study revealed a different situation from Magno et al.'s (2024) discussed above. There was a disconnect between the teachers' language and that of the learners. Teachers had minimal knowledge of Pala'wan and the language of the Muslims as they were not from the local communities. Thus, teachers faced serious challenges in using the learners' L1 due to their lack of proficiency in the language. As a result, teachers used Filipino from the onset before learners adjusted from their home language. This, according to research, impacts negatively on the students' learning.

Findings from Billones and Cabatbat's (2019) research concur with findings from Cansino et al. (2022) above. Teachers who were non-Ilonggo were expected to teach using the learners' language, yet they could not speak it. They found themselves in a situation where they had to learn Hiligaynon for them to be able to communicate with the learners. However, their knowledge of the language was so minimal that they ended up codeswitching from Hiligaynon to Filipino which they assumed to be understood by all learners. The difficulties they encountered due to lack of proficiency in the learners' language led to the minimal implementation of the MTE policy. Another study on teachers' experiences on MTE implementation conducted by Koloti & Jita (2021) revealed that in Lesotho, the official languages, English and SeSotho, dominate minority languages in the country despite the fact that policy recognizes their existence. Teachers continue to deliver lessons in the official languages to minority language learners because they are non-minority language speakers themselves. In addition, the teachers claimed that they were not trained to teach minority languages spoken in the country, hence, they cannot implement the MTE policy. The few studies discussed above highlight that teachers' experiences determine the implementation of MTE policies. It is evident that when experiences are positive, implementation is guaranteed but where there are challenges, implementation of such policies is hindered. In such a scenario, the ability of teachers to speak the learners' language is of great importance. Findings of this study reveal how teachers' experiences impact the MTE policy implementation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was informed by the qualitative approach and employed a multiple case study design to examine the classroom experiences of early childhood Shona teachers in Shangani-speaking schools. The qualitative research approach was deemed pertinent since it primarily examined the participants' 'lived experiences' and sought to understand, from their point of view, why and how they behaved in a particular manner (Oranga & Matere, 2023). This made it possible for me to understand the teachers' experiences from their own perspective. Thus, by using a qualitative research approach, this study was fully set up in its

natural setting (Ugwu & Eze Val, 2023). The case study design allowed to look into "a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" (Yin, 2017). The case study design was also useful as it enabled to generate new knowledge from the deep and systematic investigation of particular cases (Rule & John, 2011).

Sampling and Population

Purposive sampling technique was adopted to include responses from ten teachers from three predominantly Shangani schools with a population of thirty-seven teachers who spoke Shona. The sample as well as the setting was the most suitable (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020), since early childhood Shona-speaking teachers share helpful insights about their experiences in teaching learners whose first language is different from theirs.

Instruments and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews and observations were used to gather data, to obtain an "in-depth insight about the experiences, behaviors, and perceptions of an individual in his or her own words" (Bazen, Barg, & Takeshita, 2021). One-on-one semi-structured interviews enabled to understand the perception of the study participants. On the other hand, lesson observations enabled to observe first-hand how Shona teachers dealt with educating learners who spoke Shangani. Each school was allocated a day for interviews and another day for lesson observations. An interview guide was used for one-on-one interviews with the teachers in quiet places within the school premises. Interview sessions ranged from a minimum of 16 minutes, and a maximum of 30 minutes. All the interviews were audio recorded for later transcription. Each of the participating teachers was observed teaching a thirty-minute lesson which were all video recorded. An observation checklist was used to capture observational data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the thematic approach. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and analyzing patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Ugwu & Eze Val (2023), in thematic analysis, researchers endeavor to "locate, recognize and interpret themes and patterns in qualitative data." Five themes emerged from the data, and they were critically analyzed in line with the research objectives. The names used in the discussion of findings are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the research participants.

Results and findings

The findings from the interviews and lesson observations indicate that the three schools' Shona early childhood teachers are not competent in the Shangani language, and this has made their attempts to teach their Shangani-speaking learners unbearable. Teaching Shangani-speaking learners has been extremely frustrating for them due to their lack of proficiency. The following themes are used to discuss their classroom experiences:

- Communication breakdown in the classroom context
- Feelings of inadequacy among teachers
- Learning the language from learners
- Humiliation felt by teachers
- Impact of the classroom experiences on MTE policy implementation

Communication Breakdown in the Classroom Context

Lack of proficiency by Shona speaking teachers in the Shangani language has caused communication breakdown in the early childhood classrooms in three schools. According to teachers, early childhood learners cannot understand English if it is used as the medium of teaching because they only have their first exposure to the language when they start school. During lesson delivery, there was evidently a communication breakdown in the classrooms as teachers struggled to relay information to their learners as shown in the ensuing discussion.

It was noted that Tafadzwa, a teacher at Mandleni Primary School, dominated the class during an Environmental Science lesson on maps and landforms. She introduced her lesson in the following way using the English language (T stands for the teacher and P stands for the pupils):

T: We are learning about landforms. Which landforms can you see?
P: (No response)

Then, using the Shona language, she began to describe landforms. After that, learners were instructed to open on page 18 of their Environmental Science textbooks and name the different landforms there. After that, she instructed her learners to go outside and identify various landforms while speaking in both

English and Shona. It was clearly observed, from the way the learners answered the teacher's questions, that most of them were unable to comprehend what she was saying. As she switched between Shona and English, which the Grade 2 learners apparently could not understand, she was essentially talking to herself. While the teacher attempted to deliver her lesson, the majority of the learners were busy playing. However, the teacher continuously presented the concepts in two unfamiliar languages, but, there was very little student participation in the lesson.

The following excerpt demonstrates that although the teacher would have asked the questions in either Shona or English, the learners answered part of her questions in Shangani.

T: I said tarisai panezvakatikomberedza, ndezvipi zvinhu zvamuri kuona zvatingati malandforms? (From the environment, which landforms can you identify?)
P1: Hibona xitshabyana. (I can see a hill)
T: What is xitshabyana?
P1: (No verbal response but points to the hill)
T: Ok. What else can you see? What other landforms can you see?
P2: Hibona xihlahla (I can see a tree).
T: Good

Since the second student's response, 'tree', is incorrect and can indicate that he had not understood the question, it is proof that there was a breakdown in communication between Teacher Tafadzwa and her learners because she acknowledged it as a correct answer. The issue of communication breakdown is further supported by the fact that she asked the same question repeatedly, but the learners were unable to provide the anticipated responses.

'Materials and Technology' was the topic of an Environmental Science lesson presented by Bhizana Primary School teacher, Tadiwa. Her lesson's primary focus was on the characteristics of synthetic materials, specifically those that have the ability to stretch. To begin her lesson, the instructor asked the class to name objects that were created by humans. Although she asked the question in English, the few learners who responded did so in both Shangani and English. Some of the answers given by the pupils were: bhasikirhi (bicycle), movha (car), and dress. After that she said:

T: Take out your Environmental Science textbooks. I want you to open on page 77. Are you now on page 77?
P: Yes (of about 6 pupils).
T: We want to look at properties of man-made materials on page 77. We want to talk about materials that stretch, for example, this rubber band that I am holding. It can stretch kureva kuti inenge ichiwedzera (meaning it will be increasing in length). I want you to look at the list of things and identify materials that stretch. (Silence for about half a minute). What else can stretch?
P: (Silence)
T: We also have elastic. Do you know Elastic? Elastic hamuizivi? (Don't you know elastic?)

(She paused for a moment after talking to herself for a long time before attempting to define elastic once more. Since she lacked the actual elastic, she attempted to clarify by using examples of clothing that typically contains elastic. Apparently, all of her definitions of elastic in the exchange above were in English and Shona.) After her explanations she asked a question:

T: So, think of materials that stretch. Hapana material yamuri kuona here inostetcheka (don't you see any material that stretches?)
P: Spider.
T: Can a spider stretch?

Learners merely echoed after Teacher Tadiwa as she continued to identify the materials that stretch on page 77. She then assigned each student a written assignment. Teacher Tadiwa's lesson was clearly teacher-dominated. The main reason for this is that her explanations were unclear to her learners because she frequently code-switched from Shona to English, which the learners seemed unable to understand. One student, as shown in the discussion above, answered 'spider' for materials that stretch, which may indicate that he had not fully understood the question.

This demonstrates how teachers like Tafadzwa and Tadiwa are unable to communicate effectively with their learners due to their lack of proficiency in Shangani. It was clear that the learners had not understood the concept even though teacher Tafadzwa had taken them outside to view the real landforms because most of them were unable to correctly answer the questions the instructor had placed on the chalkboard. This demonstrates how the learners' ability to master the material was hampered by the teacher's failure to use Shangani as the MOI. Additionally, it indicates that the teachers' efforts were in vain because they were unable to accomplish their goals because the learners did not comprehend the concepts.

As a result of the two parties' inability to communicate, the teachers' efforts to teach were rendered

ineffective. Teachers who speak Shona suffer because they are not fluent in Shangani, which makes it difficult for them to interact with Shangani learners. Teachers got frustrated as a result of their lessons becoming teacher-dominated and repetitive, with learners unable to provide significant answers. A breakdown in communication resulted in lengthy classes as teachers performed 'verbal gymnastics' to try and help learners understand the new concepts using the English and Shona languages. Thus, no meaningful learning is taking place in these minority language classrooms as the teachers struggle to communicate with the learners who speak a different language from theirs. As a result, teachers feel inadequate to teach these minority language learners. This is discussed in detail in the subsequent section.

Feelings of Inadequacy Among Teachers

Teachers who speak Shona feel inadequate when it comes to teaching early childhood learners since they are not proficient in Shangani. In response to an interview question that aimed to determine the impact of her inability to engage in meaningful communication with her learners, Mary, a teacher at Mandleni Primary School, said the following: It *makes me feel I am not doing justice to them. I should be fluent in Shangani for me to use it in class, but I am not yet fluent in the language.* In other words, Mary feels that she is short-changing her learners by not being proficient in Shangani, when they ought to be taught in a language that they are more familiar with. Her explanations of the lesson were closely observed. It was clear that she was attempting to be understood by introducing a few Shangani words into an otherwise English MOI lesson. However, as she stated in her response above, her lack of fluency in the language makes her feel unqualified to teach early childhood learners since she is unable to effectively communicate with them.

Responses from other teachers also point to the fact that teachers find it very difficult to use the Shangani language due to their lack of proficiency in it. This can be seen from the following responses: "*I really feel I am doing a* good *thing, but my Shangani is not good, so I end up not using it."* (Teacher Chipo, Mandleni School) Another teacher said, "*The policy is good for the kids but not for teachers because teachers cannot speak it [Shangani] (Teacher Paul, Mandleni School).*

The remarks indicate that although they are aware that teaching learners in Shangani is the proper course of action, teachers do not use it as MOI due to their lack of proficiency in the language. This was made clear in teacher Chipo's Mathematics lesson when she introduced the topic of the day in English and incorporated Shangani. However, because of her limited vocabulary in Shangani, she ended up essentially using English while code-switching to Shona. This was done with a full understanding that learners will not benefit fully from learning through these unfamiliar languages. This implies that learners in Chipo's class who receive instruction in two foreign languages, Shona and English, are impacted negatively as they find it difficult to comprehend concepts. On the other hand, the teacher feels inadequate as she grapples with trying to impart knowledge in her learners.

Teachers who speak Shona endure using Shangani as the MOI and teach it as a subject because MOPSE did not alter the deployment system after the 2020 Education Amendment Act and the 2013 Constitution were passed. Mandleni Primary School teacher Tafadzwa expressed regret for her lack of competence in Shangani and stated that she is prepared to be transferred to another school, where the learners are not Shangani. She responded as follows to a follow-up interview question that sought to determine whether, given the option, she would prefer to teach in a school, where Shangani is not the primary language:

> *Yes, because I feel I am not doing justice to these learners because I can't speak the language they understand. I feel that I should be transferred to another school where Shona is the major language. However, I am trying to learn the language (Shangani) on my own, but I am still very far from becoming fluent.*

This response demonstrates that teacher Tafadzwa believes her learners are not getting the most out of her teaching since she does not speak the language they understand, just like teacher Mary above. She stated that if given the option, she would not choose to teach in a school where Shangani is the primary language because of the difficulties she faces in her day-to-day work there. Since her Environmental Science lesson was mainly unsuccessful and one of the main reasons was that she was using English and Shona, which the learners could not understand. It is obvious that this teacher had a good reason to opt for a transfer. Other elements that affect a lesson's success, such as learner readiness and the availability of germane media, might also have an impact, but in this instance, the language barrier seems to have had a greater impact because communication breakdown was so obvious. That could explain why, in her reaction to my interview question below, teacher Tafadzwa bemoaned the policymakers' lack of seriousness: "*I think another thing is lack of seriousness on the policy makers. As a result, pupils are deprived of their mother tongue because most of us cannot speak the language."* She believes she is denying her learners the opportunity to learn in their mother tongue since she is unable to engage with them in meaningful communication. She places all of this blame on policymakers who are not taking the policy seriously by failing to provide training for instructors who, like her, do not understand the language. The situation

proved very difficult for the teachers, who, despite all their effort to impart knowledge in their learners, fail to engage meaningfully due to their lack of proficiency in the learners' language.

Learning the Language from Learners

Some of the teachers have chosen to learn the language from the learners after finding themselves in the challenging circumstances mentioned above. Teachers have to humble themselves and attempt to learn the language from their learners, according to interview responses. Here are some of their answers:

> *The situation is forcing us to learn the language. Imagine a child coming from home with no knowledge of English or Shona, what is the teacher going to do? Obviously, you should speak the language that the child understands, which in our case, is Shangani. So, we learn the language from the learners (Teacher Barbra, Ntolwane Primary School).*
> *I am Shona speaking and I have to learn from my learners (Teacher Patience, Bhizana Primary School).*

This was supported by lesson observations, which showed that teachers would say something in Shangani and then ask the learners if that was correct. Thus, Shona speaking teachers are at the mercy of their learners because instead of them teaching the learners through the Shangani medium, it is the learners who are now teaching them how to communicate. No meaningful use of the learners' language can be made under such circumstances.

Humiliation Felt by Teachers

As discussed in the foregoing discussion, some of the participating teachers have made efforts to acquire the language from the learners in an attempt to adjust to the requirements of their school setups. However, this has presented difficulties for the teachers when they use the Shangani language incorrectly. Some of the answers provided to a semi-structured interview question that aimed to determine how pupils responded when Shona-speaking teachers utilized Shangani as the medium of teaching were:

> *They are very comfortable but sometimes they laugh at me when I make a mistake and then tell me the correct word…. At the same time, it also makes me feel embarrassed when they laugh (Teacher Tadiwa of Bhizana Primary School).*
> *I use very few Shangani words when teaching because I don't know the language. I am still learning it. But when I use the Shangani words the children laugh at me because sometimes, I make mistakes. The pupils know that I am not a good Shangani speaker, so they laugh at me (Teacher Mary of Mandleni Primary School).*

These responses demonstrate that teachers Mary and Tadiwa feel humiliated when their learners make fun of them. As a result, Mary has chosen to use very few Shangani words in her instruction—possibly only those she is quite certain of. Chipo, a teacher at Mandleni Primary School, responded to the same interview question by saying: "*They laugh at the teacher. I am not good at Shangani at all. When I try to explain difficult concepts to them using the language they laugh. My pronunciation is very poor."* It is clear from teacher Mary's answer that even though she has worked hard to acquire the Shangani language, she still makes mistakes while attempting to use it to interact with the learners. Her learners laugh at her whenever she makes a mistake since they know she is limited in the Shangani language. Based on her statement above, it is clear that she feels really bad about the learner's behaviour. The fact that her learners make fun of her demonstrates how the Shona-speaking teachers are humiliated by their learners, who are aware of their incapacity to speak Shangani.

Then, based on her statement above, it was concluded that Mary used very few Shangani terms that she was truly sure of. She never took the chance to attempt using terms that she was unsure of since she was aware of the potential consequences, which included her learners laughing at her. It appears that teachers Mary, Chipo and Patience are in a similar situation. Teacher Chipo stated that although she made an effort to explain difficult concepts using the Shangani language, her most difficulty is pronouncing words correctly. The learners make fun of her when she mispronounces the words, which makes her feel embarrassed. Due to fear of humiliation, teachers no longer have the zeal to continue trying to use the learners' language as the MOI.

The researchers' own experience during data gathering confirmed the teachers' experiences. Using the few Shangani terms it was learnt how to thank and say goodbye to the learners in Shangani after one of the lesson observations. The learners laughed when I said: Hikesile ngopfu (meaning thank you very much). I asked why they were giggling and one of them told me that what I had said was wrong and he then told me that I was supposed to say: Hikesile ngovhu. I initially believed that teachers were exaggerating their experiences when they claimed that learners would laugh at them when they made a mistake when speaking Shangani, but after considering the experience I mentioned above, I was able to confirm that teachers do face difficulties in carrying out their duties.

These experiences can lead to frustration and development of negative attitudes towards the use of the

learners' language. This ultimately compromises the implementation of MTE. Teachers like Chipo and Mary use the Shangani language less because they are afraid that learners will make fun of them. The experiences discussed above have contributed to the non-implementation of Shangani as MOI in the three schools. The subsequent discussion focuses on this in greater detail.

Impact of classroom experiences on MTE policy implementation

The three schools' implementation of the MTE policy has been adversely impacted by the experiences of the Shona-speaking teachers in the classroom. Lesson observation revealed that teachers code-switched between the Shona language (their own language, not the learners' language) and primarily used English as the medium of instruction. Most of the Shona teachers were reluctant to use the Shangani Language to deliver lessons, with a few code-switching to Shangani, for fear of humiliation. The hegemony of major languages over minor languages (Gramsci, 1971) is shown in the fact that learners are taught in two foreign languages rather than their native Shangani language. This suggests that MTE is not being implemented as a result of the Shona-speaking instructors' classroom experiences, of course, at the expense of the early childhood learners' meaningful learning. Teachers who participated in interviews emphasized the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's (MoPSE) lack of dedication to putting the MTE policy into practice. They gave the following responses in response to an interview question which sought to establish what they thought were the contributing factors to their experiences:

> *We were not told how to use it! We were never trained in the Shangani Language. So how can we be blamed for not using Shangani if the ministry itself is not taking it seriously? (Teacher Tolerant, Mandleni School)*
> *I think I would say the policymakers should make this policy functional because if that is not done this very noble policy can die a natural death because most of the teachers don't know how to go about it. (Teacher Victoria, Ntolwane School).*
> *it is necessary to ensure that the school has a Shangani resource teacher so that non-Shangani speaking teachers can consult with him whenever they have problems. (Teacher Tanya, Ntolwane School).*

These answers present a grim picture of MoPSE's lack of dedication to guaranteeing the use of the learners' mother tongue as the medium of teaching, particularly in minority language schools. According to the interview responses, the majority of teachers are not fluent in the language, and the ministry has not provided them with resource teachers or training to help them explain the material to learners in their own language. Overall, teachers reported that the ministry's approach to the implementation of MTE left them unmotivated to implement the policy.

The struggles that the early childhood Shona teachers go through in the three schools have caused untold suffering to them. They said that because of the difficulties they encounter, they are enduring rather than enjoying teaching the early childhood classes. They become frustrated because they undergo a lot of stress attempting to teach these young learners. During my lesson observation, I saw that several teachers vented their frustration on the learners due to their inability to communicate effectively. In teacher Paul's class, the teacher labelled the learners dull. Due to their experiences, instructors stated that if given the option, they would prefer to teach in schools that speak Shona since they found it challenging to interact with Shangani learners at the early childhood level, which had a detrimental effect on their enthusiasm and morale.

Discussion

Results of this study show that there is serious communication breakdown between teachers and learners due to teachers' lack of proficiency in the Shangani language. Mokibelo's (2016) results on the implementation of the Botswana LiEP are comparable to the circumstances at the three schools in the current study. She indicated that there was a breakdown in communication in the classrooms of Bazezuru learners because they were taught by teachers who spoke Setswana, Ikalanga, and other languages. Teachers tried to address the challenge by code-switching and code-mixing but like the teachers in the current study, they used their own languages. According to Mokibelo (2016), the supposed solution for the communication breakdown issue made learners' conceptual understanding of issues worse as they were not familiar with the languages that the teachers used.

According to research by some academics (Ndamba, 2008; Phiri, Kaguda, & Mabhena, 2013), the stakeholders' perceptions of the first language in relation to English determine how well MTE policies are implemented. However, in this study, teachers were not using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction because they are genuinely unable to speak it, not because they had a negative attitude towards the learners' language. Thus, it is not always the case that teachers have negative attitudes towards indigenous minority languages. Like in Koloti & Jita's (2021) study, teachers in the current study were willing to use the minority language for teaching but their lack of knowledge on how to speak and use it as a medium of instruction negatively affected its implementation.

Due to their lack of proficiency, teachers have to suffer humiliation and doubt their adequacy in providing meaningful education to the minority language learners. Teaching in a predominantly Shangani community causes them a lot of stress and frustration as they struggle to communicate with their learners. Unlike the experiences of teachers in Magno et al.'s (2024) study, where teachers enjoyed teaching through the mother tongue, the experiences of teachers in this study were similar to findings from Cansino et al.'s (2022) study, where mother tongue use was difficult due to teachers' lack of proficiency in the learners' language. In both cases, the teachers' difficult experiences negatively affected the implementation of the MTE policies.

Results showed that teachers abandoned the learner's language due to fear of being laughed at by their learners. They code switched between English and Shona (two unfamiliar languages to the learners) and this did not make the situation any better as they grappled to relay concepts to the learners. Their situation is different from findings of a study conducted by Abiyo (2024) in Kenya where it was established that although the Pokomo speaking learners faced challenges when the English language was used, teachers code-switched between the three languages-English, Kiswahili and Pokomo to address the communication challenges. They could do this because they could speak the Pokomo language unlike the teachers in the current study who could not speak the Shangani language at all. Overall, MTE policy implementation in the three Shangani schools is negatively affected by the teachers' difficult classroom experiences.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

MTE policy's implementation is determined by many factors as shown by previous research. In addition to factors such as negative attitudes of stakeholders, lack of material resources and issues of globalization, the current study delved into the issue of lack of human resources and how teachers experience teaching learners who speak a different language from theirs. The experiences of the principal implementers of MTE policies can either facilitate or impede implementation of the policy. In this case, it can be concluded that Shona teachers' difficult classroom experiences in the three schools largely contributed to non-implementation of the MTE policy. Because of the challenges they face every day in Shangani-speaking classrooms, Shona teachers at the early childhood level do not use Shangani as the MOI in the three schools. Due to their difficulties, Shangani has been abandoned in favor of English and Shona; two foreign languages to the learners. The three schools utilize Shangani sparingly, obviously at the expense of the learners whose rights continue to be infringed by the continuous use of Shona and English.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations and implications for practice can be made:

1. To encourage the use of Shangani in the early childhood classrooms, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) ought to consider deploying teachers who speak the learners' language to schools with a large Shangani student body. If there are no enough Shangani speaking teachers, MOPSE should immediately conduct a nationwide inventory of Shangani-speaking educators and re-assign them to schools as resource instructors to assist the struggling Shona-speaking teachers.
2. School administrators can solve the communication crises in the early childhood classes by assigning Shangani-speaking teachers in their schools to teach early childhood classes to enable the young learners to understand educational concepts through their L1. It is at the early childhood level that MTE is critical as learners would not have mastered the English Language.
3. Training of elementary school teachers who understand Shangani (and other minority languages in Zimbabwe) should be given top priority. Teacher training colleges may consider affirmative action to allow speakers of minority languages with less points than the expected five Ordinary level passes to be enrolled for early childhood teacher training. This may help address the linguistic disconnects in the Zimbabwean minority language classrooms.

It should be acknowledged the study has its own limitations; the major one being that it only focused on early childhood Shona speaking teachers' experiences of teaching in three Shangani schools and did not focus on other minority languages in Zimbabwe. Future research can look into the experiences of teachers, who teach in the other minority language schools and how their experiences affect MTE policy implementation. A comparative study on teachers' experiences of teaching in minority language classes in different African countries can also be done to give a broader picture of how these experiences impact on MTE implementation in Zimbabwe and beyond.

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