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English Medium Instruction, an Impediment to Educational Achievement and Social Justice Education in Primary Schools: A Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article is poised to explore English Medium Instruction (EMI) and its potential to impede social justice education in primary schools in Chivi District (Zimbabwe). The article specifically discusses the impact that English as the medium of instruction has on primary Grade 3 learners in Chivi District and the implications it has on fostering social justice education in the education sector in general. This conclusion is because Grade 3 learners in Zimbabwe are introduced to EMI for the first time at the Grade 3 level, a situation that reveals social injustice in education. In this article, learners exhibited a number of vices as a result of EMI, for instance, early immersion and poor academic performance, among others. The article falls within the qualitative approach, where interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis were used as data generation methods. A total of 46 participants were purposely selected and were the data sources for this article. The collected data was useful to find out to what degree EMI champions educational achievement and fosters equity and equality in the primary schools. Some of the findings of the article are slowness in thinking, experiencing two second languages, low self-esteem, language attrition, and English as the language of unity in the classroom, among many others. In light of the findings, the article suggests that the use of ILs as the medium of instruction at the primary school level needs immediate attention for social justice education to be a reality.

Keywords: impediment, social justice, educational achievement, sociological perspective,



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Introduction

This article is poised to explore English Medium Instruction (EMI) and its potential to impede social justice education in primary schools in Chivi District (Zimbabwe). The article specifically discusses the impact that English as the medium of instruction has on primary Grade 3 learners in Chivi District and the implications it has on fostering social justice education in the education sector in general. This topic is because Grade 3 learners in Zimbabwe are introduced to EMI for the first time at the Grade 3 level, a situation that reveals social injustice in education. In this article, the learners exhibited several negative behaviors due to EMI, such as early immersion and poor academic performance, among others.

The article falls within the qualitative approach, where interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis were used as data generation methods. A total of 46 participants were purposely selected and were the data sources for this article. The collected data was useful to find out to what degree EMI champions educational achievement and fosters equity and equality in the primary schools. Some of the findings of the article are slowness in thinking, experiencing two second languages, low self-esteem, language attrition, and English as the language of unity in the classroom, among many others. In light of the findings, the article suggests that the use of ILs as the medium of instruction at the primary school level needs immediate attention in order for social justice education to be a reality.

Background

English as an MOI has negatively impacted learners' academic achievement and social justice education, particularly at the Grade 3 level in the Chivi District. EMI at Grade 3 level has been associated with poor academic achievement and a dearth of education for social justice to a large extent. This is exacerbated by the fact that EMI is first introduced to learners at Grade 3 level in the Zimbabwe education system (Zimbabwe Education Act, Amendment Bill, 2019:10).

In addition, indigenous languages (ILs) Shona, Xichangana, and Ndebele are dominant, which defines Chivi District as multilingual. The exclusion of ILs to become the MoI places learner academic performance and education for social justice in the 'linguistic intensive care unit.' Various research articles have been carried out on EMI in the primary schools. A study done by Wilhite (2013) maintains that the use of non-local languages as the MoI does not foster social justice education practices since culture and identity of the learners are threatened. Wilhite's (2013) study concluded that the use of ILs as languages of education may go a long way to proffer equity and equality in the education arena.

Paauw (2009) argued that in both the Philippines and Malaysia, the Dutch language, which is the official language, is viewed as a threat to other linguistic groupings and concluded that there is a need for linguistic diversity in Malaysia and Philippines to improve academic performance. In another study, Prah (2008) lamented that Africa is not Anglophone, Francophone, or Lusophone, but is Afrophone. However, Prah (2008) concluded that not even one school is using ILs as the MoI. In that context academic achievement as well as linguistic diversity and rights are violated, and education for social justice in primary schools is not forthcoming.

In another study, Nthangase (2011) in South Africa concluded that the implication of learning in English for learners whose mother tongue is neither English nor Afrikaans is devastating when the learners are expected to switch to EMI. Nthangase's (2011) study recommended the use of ILs as the MoI for learners to achieve academically and appraise education for social justice in the education sector, particularly in primary schools. Madoda (2014) reiterated that in many schools, governing bodies consequently adopt a language in education policy in which English is the official MoI. Such a policy, however, presents a serious problem since Black learners' English language proficiency is often not adequate to use it as the MoI. The researcher concluded that EMI acts as a hindrance to academic attainment and gave a suggestion that the MoI should be a language that learners know best. However, stripping one's local language to become the MoI is a serious linguistic human rights violation. To that end, it constitutes a dearth of education for social justice.

Another study worth mentioning was carried out in South Africa by Manyike and Lemmer (2014), and they concluded that South African learners experience problems such as lack of self-confidence, poor performance, and slowness in thinking. Manyike & Lemmer's (2014) findings are indicative of the fact that EMI is indeed an impediment to education for social justice. This is because learners perform poorly and lack self-confidence due to poor English language proficiency. A report by the Uganda National Examinations

Board (UNEB) noted that Grade 3 learners performed much better in mathematics lessons that were conducted in mother tongue than those conducted in English (UNEB, 2012). The above is indicative that the home language is an asset when used as the MoI. According to the UNEB (2012), ILs displayed far better results than English at Grade 3. This was probably because the learners at that Grade 3 level were proficient in mother tongue than English. It is against this background that a critical investigation of the EMI at Grade 3 is carried out.

Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ, 2016) conducted a quantitative study and concluded that there is a relationship between speaking the MoI and learner achievement, especially in reading, in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Zimbabwean situation whereby ILs are sidelined in teaching and learning at primary school level negatively affects learner achievement and education for social justice. While the Ugandan case study was based on mathematics and English (UNEB, 2012), this study focuses on transition from ILs to English. The idea is to explore which language motivates learners better in terms of performance. The purpose of embarking on this study was to explore how to best create a democratic learning environment where there is language diversity.

In his qualitative study conducted in Namibia on the MoI, Harris (2011) indicated that a substantial number of learners were not coping well with the L2 (English) as language of teaching and learning. Learners could not perform well in their academic work because the language barrier thwarted their grasp of the concepts. Educational attainment is determined by the mode of communication. The communication mode in Namibia and Zimbabwe alike is English. Most of the learners have problems learning in English, and the MoI becomes a barrier for their academic success. The question is, why are schools resorting to foreign languages as the MoI when they are proving to be detrimental to academic success? Motala (2013), in his South African study, concurs that lack of proficiency in English contributes greatly to the failure of learners, yet the majority of parents choose English as the MoI for their children. Moreover, many teachers are also non-English speakers. The adage that the blind cannot lead the blind applies in the foregoing discussion. This is a result of the colonial mentality that regards English as the lingua franca (global language). Despite the negative results that are attributed to EMI, it has gained great recognition.

In the same vein, Dube and Ncube (2013), in their qualitative study of the IL Ndebele conducted in Zimbabwe, posit that language and education cannot be separated from one another. If education is to be achieved, language is automatically the vehicle to success, and educational achievement is based on the effective use of language. The survival of any language is vested in its use as the MoI. Thus, learner educational achievement is maximized when the language of teaching and learning is the learner's first language. Linguistic diversity in education is pivotal for learners to enjoy their learning.

In accordance with the above, Shizha (2012) argues that the marginalization of ILs as the MoI and undervaluing of indigenous perspectives is a threat to educational achievement and success, cultural identities, and self-perceptions of African school graduates. For maximum benefits of the school system to be realised, ILs should be incorporated in the education system of the learners who speak these ILs. Similarly, in a mixed-method study done in Mozambique between the years 1993-1997 among Grade 1 to 3 learners using Cinyanja and Xitsonga, Trudell (2016) established that bilingualism and literacy skills, self-confidence, and extended classroom learner participation is a prerogative of mother tongue instruction. The foregoing discussion demonstrates the need to take heritage languages seriously. Researchers concur that heritage languages are an integral part of the educational achievement of learners and education for social justice, especially at the primary school level.

While the aforementioned studies are making contributions to the use of English as the MoI in schools, none of the articles has focused on EMI in primary schools and its relationship to educational achievement and education for social justice. Thus, our article is one of its kind as it seeks to unearth the vices that EMI imposes on social justice education in the primary school sector. In light of this, the aim of the article is to explore the challenges faced by Grade 3 learners in Chivi District as a result of EMI and suggest how social justice education can be achieved.

Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted for this article is Walberg's (1981) theory of educational achievement. The major tenets of Walberg's (1981) theory of educational achievement are as follows:

- Psychosocial characteristics of individual students and their immediate psychological environments influence educational outcomes, for instance, self-concept, behavioural and attitudinal.
- There are nine key factors that influence educational achievement: learner ability, motivation, age/developmental level, quality of instruction, quantity of instruction, classroom climate, home environment, peer group and exposure to mass media outside school (Walberg, Fraser and Weich, 1986).

The theory is relevant for this article since it defines the classroom learning environment and some psychosocial tenets as the chief determinants of what the classroom has for the learner and the education sector in general (Rugutt and Chemosit, 2005). For this article, the linguistic classroom environment, to a large degree, dictates what the school has in offer. The learners' self-concept, attitude, behaviour, motivation, and the overall learner engagement in the classroom, useful for academic attainment and education for social justice, are determined by the classroom linguistic environment.

As it stands, the MoI is not the home language of the learners in Chivi District schools. The learners are affiliating to Shona, Xichangana, and Ndebele (Mashuro, 2021). However, none of the aforementioned ILs is the MoI. The early immersion and transitional submersion exposed to Grade 3 learners affect their psychosocial tenets such as self-concept, motivation, attitudes, and behaviours. To that end, it homes in the notion that EMI is an impediment to education for social justice and academic attainment of learners in primary schools.

Research objectives

- Explore EMI in learner academic achievement and fostering education for social justice at primary school level.
- Determine the role of English as the medium of instruction in the educational achievement of Grade Three learners in two Chivi District primary schools when it comes to fostering social justice.
- Find out the relationship between ILs and learner academic performance

Methodology

This study was informed by a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological research design, imbedded in constructivist research paradigm. Semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis were conducted to gather relevant data on the issue under discussion. The researcher interacted with the participants in their natural environment, and they discussed their lived experiences of EMI at Grade 3 level (Creswell, 2011:42; Cohen et al., 2011). The generated qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis method.

The target population for this research consisted of 1 200 Grade 3 learners and 36 teachers, to make a total target population of 1 236. The researchers also had access to classroom records for both teachers and learners. Classroom records were used to select learners as participants. Of the 36 teachers, 10 were selected to participate in the study. These were experienced in teaching at primary school level. 30 Grade 3 learners and 6 parents were selected to take part in the study. Overall, the participants were purposively sampled due to their information richness and accessibility (Chitsaka, 2014; Brett and Brett, 2011).

All measures were taken to make sure that participants had full knowledge of the aims of the research. As such, the researcher upheld the right for the participants to withdraw from the proceedings. They are further guaranteed the right to informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, avoidance of harm, and protection of privacy (Creswell, 2014). Six themes were generated from the interviews, observation, and document analysis qualitative data generation methods.

Findings and Discussion

This article on EMI as an impediment to educational achievement and education for social justice at primary school level identified English as a barrier to educational achievement and social justice. The six themes that emerged are discussed below.

Poor Performance in the Classroom

The research findings indicated that there was poor performance in the classroom emanating from the incompetency of learners in using English as the MoI. Participants mentioned that the use of English as the MoI is associated with poor academic performance. The study findings revealed that the majority of the learners were performing below standard in the classroom as a result of the use of English as the MoI.

One participant made the following remarks in substantiating the above findings;

"English is a barrier to academic achievement of learners because it is a foreign language.

Its inclusion in the education system is to exclude ILs.

Learners do not score much in English because they do not understand it since it is not their language.

Most learners were incompetent in English. A study by Mwinsheikhe (2002) concurs that learners exhibit minimal participation and low-performance grades in some subjects as a result of the use of English as the MoI, and also understanding English is a problem that both the teachers and learners are experiencing (Mlay, 2010).

Following the above, Erling et al. (2017) argue that issues around language and the MoI in schools are greatly contributing to low achievement. This implies that the use of English as the language of instruction at Grade 3 had serious negative effects on the educational achievement of learners, and it is a drawback for education for social justice at primary school level in Zimbabwe. Walberg et al (1986) argue that the classroom climate and the home environment have a strong influence on academic performance. The learners' inability to speak fluently in English is a result of the home environment, which is a mismatch to the school linguistic environment.

Slowness in Thinking

The research findings from interviews suggested that EMI compromised the learners' thinking capacity. Responses from the majority of the participants were indicative that the thinking ability of the learners was short-changed as a result of the use of English language in teaching and learning. This implies that learners tended to think in their heritage languages. A head teacher exposed his feelings as follows:

"English is not commonly used at home and because of that learners think and conceptualise in their home languages before translating to English".

So the use of English as the MoI was a hindrance to their educational attainment and demise to social justice education practices as well because learners had to think in mother tongues first before they translated that to English. The process was compromising their performance to a larger extent. Studies confirm that human beings use language to think and that language can be viewed as a vital thinking tool (Ntshangase, 2011; Hopkyns, 2014; Mlay, 2010).

Nevertheless, problems emanate when a person has to think in another language and communicate ideas in another language different from the mother tongue. Learners at Grade 3 in Chivi District speak one of the following ILs, Shona, XiChangana, and Ndebele. This implies that they think in those languages. However, when it comes to speaking and writing academic work, they use English. In the process, they experience problems leading to poor academic achievement. To that end, EMI does not promote education for social justice.

The study findings are in line with critical Freire (1980) view that cultural conquest may lead to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded, and they begin to respond to the values and goals of the invaders, and for the cultural invasion to succeed, the invaded must become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority.

Reading and Writing Difficulties

The study findings indicated that learners had torrid moments in reading and writing activities, where they were required to use English as the mode of communication. Most learner-participants mentioned that they experienced reading and writing difficulties in English and that the ILs were instrumental in facilitating reading and writing in English. This implies that L1 is the key to unlocking the learners' potential to deal with L2 content.

Explanations from the participants in line with the above findings are as follows;

"For learners to be good English readers, I think we should begin to sharpen their reading in L1. This will assist them to generalise reading in the L2. Once they master reading, they will even do better in writing their fortnightly and end of term tests".

Thus, for Grade 3 learners to be able to read with fluency in English, they should first learn to read in their L1. L1 reading and writing skills can then be generalised to take up tasks in English. The teacher-research participants further revealed that reading and writing tasks in English were lagging as compared to reading and writing tasks done in home languages. A study by Ochshom and Garcia (2007) confirms that reading and writing in a second language is a difficult task. Following the above, a study by Trudell (2016) concurred that the majority of the learners are below the basic level of reading proficiency by the end of Grade 2 to enable them to read effectively in the next grades (Trudell, 2016). This implies that the use of English as the MoI at Grade 3 in Chivi District primary schools was a threat to both the learners' academic achievement and social justice education practices. Learners did not score much since they used English in most subjects. Reading and writing are the macro language skills integral for one to attain educationally.

The foregoing study findings are in tandem with Walberg's 1986 theory of academic achievement principle, which states that Psychosocial characteristics of individual students and their immediate psychological environments influence educational outcomes, for instance, self-concept, behavioural and attitudinal. This is because learners in Grade 3 abruptly shift to English as the MoI, while in Grade 2 and down to Early Childhood Development, they were using home languages as the MoI. The situation tends to confuse learners, and as a result, they become psychologically shocked.

The study findings are also in line with Miller's (1999) theory of social justice 'need' assumption, a claim that one is lacking necessities and is being harmed or is in danger of being harmed. This is largely because learners are being deprived of their rights to read and write in the mother languages in most of the subjects, which may grant them the opportunity to score better in their academic work. To that end, EMI at Grade 3 thwarts learner academic achievement, and it does not promote education for social justice in Chivi District primary schools.

Promotion of Subtractive Bilingualism

The research findings indicated that English was a barrier in academic achievement and education for social justice at primary Grade 3 in that it promoted subtractive bilingualism, where other languages, especially heritage languages, were at the verge of disappearing.

One head of the school had this to say;

"English becomes a liability when it is strictly applied to the extent of excluding Shona, the indigenous language".

The learner participants lamented that the continued exclusion of ILs in teaching and learning constitutes significantly to their poor performance in academic work. Field notes from observation also indicate that both teachers and learners were code-switching during the teaching and learning process. A study by Djite (2008) confirms that English is the language of the elite who have abandoned their home languages. The mother languages are associated with the home, while English is related to acquiring new knowledge. This implies that the school curriculum is dominated by English and the heritage languages are denigrated, and they occupy peripheral roles, yet they command much respect in terms of followers in Chivi District primary schools.

The use of English as the MoI at Grade 3 tends to threaten the development of local languages, which are rich in African cultures, beliefs, customs, norms, and values. The learners gradually lose their mother languages and become associated with those who speak English. In other words, they become assimilated into the English culture and values.

The study findings are in contrast with Miller's (1999) theory of social justice principle of equality, which states that society should regard and treat its citizens as equals and that benefits such as certain rights should be distributed equally (Nelson et al., 2016). Citizens cannot be regarded as equal when their mother languages are not used in the education system in which they are stakeholder number one. Furthermore, justice is not a reality where citizens' linguistic rights are violated. Thus, the promotion of subtractive bilingualism in Chivi District primary schools is a barrier to educational achievement and exacerbates social justice malpractices in the education system.

Learners Learn Faster in ILs than in English

The findings of the article on EMI in Chivi District primary schools revealed that learners perform much better in ILs than using English as the MoI. Research findings in both interviews and observations indicated that learners learn faster in ILs than in L2. This implies that even difficult concepts were better understood when they were explained to them in home languages.

The following comment made by one of the participants substantiates these findings;

"Concepts explained in ILs are better understood than those done in English. Learners participate very well when using their mother language".

Effective communication between the learners and the teachers was realised when ILs were used during teaching and learning. A study by UNEB (2012) confirms that Grade 3 learners' performance in numeracy conducted in ILs was much better than when taught in English. The report assumes that the numeracy that is taught in local languages enables learners to grasp the concepts better (UNEB, 2012). Similarly, Trudell (2016) concurs that using mother tongue in education consolidates learner participation, minimises attrition and cascades to parental and siblings' support in the child's education.

Furthermore, Owu-Ewie and Eshun (2015) contend that teachers agree that the use of the local languages is a more reliable vehicle of communication through which learners learn better and faster. Document analysis, especially the language written exercises and the Individual Record Book, revealed that learners were scoring high marks in ILs than in English. The role accorded to English at Grade 3 is a counter to the development of ILs in teaching and learning. The situation has proved to be a barrier to the learners' academic achievement and a source of social justice education malpractices because learners are prevented from using the languages (ILs) they understand best in teaching and learning.

The above findings are in tandem with Walberg's theory, which alludes to the fact that learner motivation and ability have the power to enhance academic performance. English is regarded as the worthwhile knowledge at primary Grade 3 in Chivi District, and the ILs come second. Nevertheless, ILs have proved to be very useful in the academic achievement of learners. This article has proved beyond any reasonable doubt that the dominance of English in the school curriculum in Chivi District primary schools is a demotivator.

The article findings indicated that ILs could compete successfully with English as the vehicle for curriculum implementation. The sidelining of ILs in teaching and learning is in contrast with Sturman's (1997) theory of social justice and the principle of curricular justice, which opines that curriculum design and enactment should attend to the principle of social justice (Nelson et al., 2016). To that end, the education system in Chivi District is marred by social justice malpractices.

Indigenous Languages versus Self-Confidence

As a way to indicate that EMI is a barrier to educational achievement and education for social justice, participants' responded that ILs had greater capacity to build confidence in learners than English. This means using English as the MoI developed low self-esteem in primary Grade 3 learners because they were not proficient in it.

Comments supporting these findings are provided below;

"Using ILs as the MoI is beneficial because learners will gain confidence and understand it better since this language starts from the birth of the child".

"You know, when you lose your mother language, you have lost it all in that in your language you learn your culture apart from identity, dignity and self-esteem".

The development of inferiority complex led to the poor academic performance of learners. Learners needed to master the language of education for them to communicate the curriculum content with fluency. Research findings from interviews indicated that they displayed self-confidence when communicating the school curriculum in their home languages. A study by Trudell (2016) confirms that there is greater classroom participation of learners who learn in their mother tongue, as well as greater self-confidence. Tambulakani and Bus (2011) concur that English as the MoI is a liability to the nation. This implies that the use of English as the MoI is a barrier to the educational achievement of learners and promotion of social justice education in the sense that learners lack self-confidence and are bound to perform dismally in their academic work.

The above research findings are in line with Walberg's theory of academic achievement, which implies that home environment, self-concept, behavior, and attitudes affect learners' academic achievements. The ILs were the 'key' to unlock the academic barriers. The school, in this instance, was not an extension of the home. Learners met new language and knowledge at school; hence, the development of the inferiority complex. Apart from the Walbergean theory, the study findings are also in line with Rawls' (1971) theory of social justice and the liberty principle, where each person should have the right to an extensive system of equal basic liberties (Nelson et al., 2016). The basic linguistic human right of learners tends to be violated in the education system in Chivi District primary schools. Their exposure to English deprives them the opportunity to use their home languages, thereby thwarting their self-esteem and academic performance. Thus, social justice practices are not a reality in the education system in Chivi District.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to explore the degree to which EMI was a barrier to educational achievement and education for social justice at primary Grade 3 level in Chivi District, Zimbabwe. By and large, EMI at primary school level revealed a multiple of factors indicative of low educational attainment and social justice education malpractices.

The article findings dominating the discussion include poor performance, slowness in thinking, reading, and writing challenges, promotion of subtractive bilingualism, and low self-esteem, among others. The findings above define EMI as a liability when it comes to educational achievement and the fostering of education for social justice.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested

- The research recommends that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe formulates and enacts policies that focus on linguistic diversity in the education system. The Minister responsible for education is mandated to introduce ILs in the education system since they proved to be key factors in educational achievement.
- The study recommends an end to the 'shop talk' declarations on African languages to become languages of education and the enforcement of language policies which fully recognise ILs in education for social justice to be a reality. This is necessitated by the revelations that participants indicated teacher-learner incompetence in English and rampant code-switching during lesson delivery.
- Staff development workshops, national round tables, field trips to different cultural communities and other peer support initiatives can also be harnessed to create an enabling environment to deal with linguistic diversity and social justice issues in the education system at any level.
- The study also recommends that training institutions and programmes should embrace pedagogical strategies and content which discourage exclusion of other groups in society but opt for inclusive educational practices.
- In a move to expand the scope and horizon of the knowledge base on linguistic diversity in the education sector, the study recommends the adoption of comparative studies at micro levels, for instance, school, district and provincial levels. A comparative study is ideal for identifying similar issues affecting language in the education sector and merging them to create a democratic and socially just society.

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