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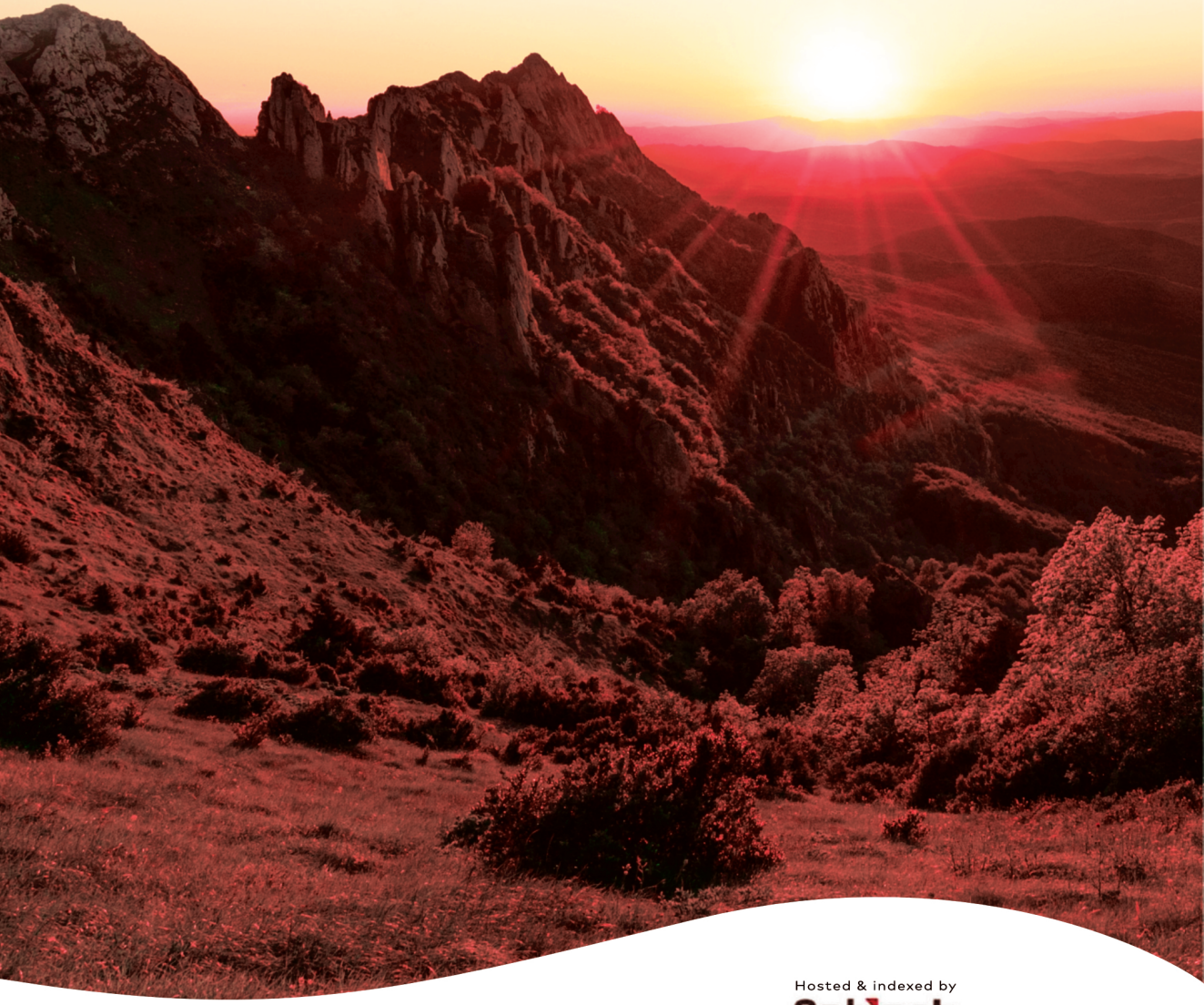

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The effects of diglossia on the teaching and learning of English as a second language: A case of Gweru rural schools

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ABSTRACT

Bilingualism is the case in the Zimbabwean socio-linguistic context as the majority of the population use two languages, English as the high variety (H) and the community's native language as the low variety (L). Such a situation is referred to by sociolinguists as diglossia, a term coined by the German linguist Karl Krumbacher as early as 1902. The school instructional language in Zimbabwe which is the official language of the state, is English. English is significantly different from vernacular languages and is rarely used in rural communities' daily interactions. This poses challenges in the teaching and learning of English as a second language particularly in rural schools due to the diglossic relationship that exists between English and the local languages. Both the teacher and the learner are usually not native speakers of the English language and this has proved to be a challenge in the teaching and learning of the second language. Findings obtained through observations, questionnaires and interviews reveal that teachers need to understand pedagogical, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic as well as cognitive consequences of diglossia, in order to teach the language effectively. Most learners have a negative attitude towards the language and are not intrinsically motivated to learn it. Learners also lack cultural capital to support them from the early stages of learning the foreign language as their communities also have a negative attitude towards the foreign language due to its origins in the country. The study advocates for the constant upgrading of the local languages especially in line with the fast advancement in technology, so that they can be used equitably with the English language as most learners would rather use their mother tongue in all subject areas. The assessment systems in place should consider variability of cultural realities as learners in rural areas have incomparable developmental milestones with those in cities, hence cannot be evaluated using the same instrument.

Key Words: Bilingualism, diglossia, second language acquisition, cultural capital.

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Introduction

The medium of instruction in Zimbabwe is English, which is significantly distinct from the home languages or mother tongues of learners. English is regarded as the High variety (H), used in formal contexts, literature, and education, while native languages serve as the Low variety (L), primarily for informal interactions and daily communication (Ferguson, 1959). This linguistic phenomenon, known as diglossia, refers to the coexistence of two language varieties in a speech community, each fulfilling specific roles (Chapanga & Makamani, 2006). In Zimbabwe, diglossia manifests with English dominating indigenous languages such as Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, Kalanga, and others (Yule, 2014). Recent studies highlight how the diglossic relationship between English and indigenous languages continues to shape Zimbabwe's education system. For example, Chitiga (2021) explores how English remains the dominant instructional language, creating barriers for learners who lack fluency in English due to limited exposure outside of school. Similarly, Taringa and Manyike (2023) describe how the elevation of Shona and Ndebele to semi-official status has created a new layer of linguistic hierarchy, sidelining other minority languages such as Ndau or Kalanga.

The persistence of English as the High variety reflects historical colonial language policies that promoted English for administration and education. Bhebe (2022) indicated the ongoing marginalisation of indigenous languages by noting that most educational materials and assessments remain in English, thereby reinforcing its dominance. Matende and Gotosa (2025) had long before argued that the linguistic hierarchy not only disadvantages rural learners but also threatens the survival of minority languages. The roots of this diglosgsic dynamic are traced back to the colonial era when the British prioritised English for instruction and limited efforts to develop written versions of local languages, focusing only on Shona and Ndebele (Myhill, 2009). As a result, English gained prominence as the language of governance and education, relegating local languages to secondary roles. The colonial legacy persists even today, with English identified as a national language and mandated as the medineneof instruction and assessment, particularly at the secondary level.

One major consequence of diglossia in Zimbabwe is the difficulty of teaching and learning English as a second language. English proficiency is critical for academic progression, as it is a core subject required to advance to tertiary education. However, rural learners often encounter the language for the first

time at school, unlike their urban counterparts who have greater exposure. This disparity creates a significant performance gap due to differences in cultural and linguistic capital. The curriculum fails to address these differences, presenting a one-size-fits-all approach that disadvantages learners in rural areas. At a sociolinguistic level, diglossia enforces distinct social roles for English and indigenous languages. English is the accepted language in formal contexts, while native languages are restricted to informal or domestic spheres (Chivhanga, 2008). This divide fosters a negative perception of indigenous languages, particularly in urban areas, where some individuals abandon their mother tongues in favour of English. Myhill (2009) observed that speakers proficient in the High-prestige language often avoid using the Low-prestige vernacular, replacing native terms with English ones even in daily interactions.

This preference for English over indigenous languages poses a threat to the survival of local dialects, particularly in urban settings. Terms and expressions in indigenous languages are gradually being replaced, eroding the linguistic and cultural identity of communities. Conversely, rural learners, who predominantly use their mother tongue, face challenges in acquiring English due to limited exposure outside the classroom. They lack fluency and confidence in the High variety, further reinforcing educational disparities. To bridge this gap, it is crucial to reconsider language policies and curricula in Zimbabwe. These should acknowledge the diverse linguistic backgrounds of learners and provide targeted support for rural communities. Promoting bilingual education and valuing indigenous languages alongside English could help mitigate the negative effects of diglossia, preserving cultural heritage while ensuring equitable access to education.

The concept of diglossia has evolved significantly since its introduction by Karl Krumbacher in 1902, where he explored its application in Greek and Arabic linguistic contexts. In his book *Das Problem des neugriechischen Schriftsprache*, Krumbacher examined how two language varieties coexisted within a community. This was further refined in 1930 by French linguist William Marcus, who studied Arabic diglossia in his work *La Disglossic Arabe*, focusing on the coexistence of literary and vernacular varieties. In 1959, Ferguson formalised the concept by categorising diglossia into High (H) and Low (L) varieties, each with distinct social functions.

Building on this, Kloss (1966) differentiated between out-diglossia, where the two varieties are unrelated languages, and in-diglossia, where they are dialects of the same language. Fishman (1967) expanded Ferguson's work by including

multilingual contexts where genetically unrelated languages serve as H and L varieties, such as colonial settings where a foreign language assumes the H role. Wardhaugh (1986) contributed to understanding how foreign languages as H-varieties, such as Latin in medieval Europe, marginalise vernaculars, further complicating second-language acquisition (Ibrahim, 2012). This study, therefore, aligns with Fishman (1967 and Wardhaugh's (1986) perspectives, focusing on the coexistence of genetically unrelated languages in diglossic settings. In Zimbabwe, English functions as the H-variety, a foreign, standardised language used as the medium of instruction. Conversely, the L-variety comprises vernacular languages, primarily Shona and Ndebele, which are used for everyday communication. The study, hence, examined the challenges posed by this linguistic disparity in Lower Gweru rural schools, particularly regarding the teaching and learning of English as a second language.

In the Zimbabwe's education system, English is critical for academic and professional advancement, as passing English at O-level is a prerequisite for further studies. However, the diglossic environment creates cognitive and linguistic challenges, as learners must simultaneously grapple with the language of instruction and subject matter (Hashen, 2022). The reliance on English as the H-variety contributes to poor performance among rural learners, who often lack exposure to English outside the classroom, impeding their success in subjects taught in the language. The study, thus, explores the effects of diglossia on English language acquisition and examines how the use of vernacular (code-switching and code-mixing) during English lessons impacts performance. Specifically, it investigates:

i) *The language varieties used by teachers and pupils during English lessons and interactions.*
ii) *The role of code-switching and code-mixing in facilitating or hindering learning.*
iii) *The broader impact of diglossia on learners' performance in English and other subjects taught in the language.*

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design with triangulation, incorporating observations, interviews, and questionnaires to collect in-depth data. The target population included teachers and learners from three rural high schools in Lower Gweru, representing diverse linguistic backgrounds. A boarding school with students from both rural and urban areas was

included to compare the effects of exposure to English outside the classroom. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed for data analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the diglossic dynamics affecting English acquisition. This approach allowed the study to identify gaps in teaching strategies and the linguistic barriers disadvantaging rural learners in Zimbabwe's education system.

This study is also informed by Lev Vygostsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development which is an approach to learning and mental development. The theory argues that human mental functioning is fundamentally a mediated process that is organized by cultural artifacts, activities and concepts (Ratner, 2002). It views language use, organisation and structure as primarily a means of mediation and is of the belief that developmental processes are influenced by participation in cultural, linguistic and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organized sporting activities and work places. As pointed out by Lantolf (2007), learners bring to the task their unique histories, goals and capacities and this has an influence on their performance. Sociocultural Theory argues that while human neurology is a necessary condition for higher order thinking, the most essential forms of human cognitive activity develop through interaction within these social and material environments (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Paolucci, 2021;Alessandroni and Ferreira, 2024). Its central instruct is mediation, and it is also concerned with internalization, regulation, the zone of proximal development and the genetic method. The research therefore analyses the effects of diglossia from a sociocultural perspective.

Findings and discussion

In Zimbabwean classrooms, diglossia and bilingualism are deeply rooted in students' linguistic experiences. Typically, two or more language varieties coexist within the classroom, with students demonstrating varying levels of proficiency in English, the High (H) variety. Teachers often face the challenge of instructing learners proficient in English while simultaneously supporting those learning the language for the first time in both spoken and written forms. In such situations, teachers tend to prioritise learners already familiar with English, using their progress to gauge second-language acquisition (Bernstein, 1981; Chitiga, 2021). However, this approach neglects learners struggling due to a lack of cultural capital and scaffolding. Sociocultural theory underscores the importance of addressing cultural realities and the role of a 'more knowledgeable

other' in facilitating learning. In Zimbabwe, disparities are evident between urban students, who often have greater exposure to English outside the classroom, and rural learners, who rely more on the classroom environment for formal English acquisition (Bhebe, 2022). Teachers must adopt teaching methods that acknowledge these disparities to create equitable learning outcomes.

A significant challenge in the Zimbabwean educational context is learners attitude and communities toward the English language. While English is often viewed as part the colonial legacy, its practical necessity for academic and professional advancement cannot be ignored. Sarahi (2016) highlighted that postcolonial1 societies frequently experience tension between indigenous languages, seen as markers of ethnic identity, and colonial languages, perceived as tools for modernity. In some rural communities in Zimbabwe, the English language is regarded as a utilitarian subject, with limited intrinsic motivation for learning it. This contrasts with urban areas where English proficiency is often associated with social and academic prestige (Matende & Gotosa, 2025). Nonetheless, the dominance of English langauge as the medium of instruction continues to marginalise indigenous languages, such as Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, Nambya, Sotho, Xosa, Kalanga, Chewa and other marginalised languages (Mpofu & Salawu, 2018; Nhongo, 2024). Overcoming these challenges requires a re-evaluation of language policies to ensure they promote linguistic diversity while recognising English's utility. Table 1 summarises learners' responses when asked which language they prefered to use at school.

Table 1: Learners' responses when asked which language they prefer to use at school

Category	English	Ndebele	Shona
Form 1	3	13	4
Form 2	5	11	4
Form 3	6	11	3
Form 4	11	7	2
Form 5	15	4	1
Form 6	18	2	0

1 As in after the political independence.

As seen in Table 1, learners in high schools often prefer using their mother tongue during the early stages of secondary education, particularly in Forms 1 and 2. However, this preference gradually shifts as learners advance, with increasing familiarity and confidence in English language. This transition can be attributed to various factors. At the primary school level, the use of the mother tongue is encouraged alongside English. UNESCO (1953) advocated for the use of local languages in education for as long as possible to ensure higher enrolment and retention rates. This approach helps learners develop cognitive and linguistic skills in a familiar context, setting the foundation for subsequent learning in English.

The Zimbabwe's language policy aligns with the recommendation, supporting the use of local languages in preschool and early grades before transitioning to English as the primary medium of instruction by Grade 4. This gradual shift is intended to balance cultural preservation with the practical needs of learners in a globalised world. The involvement of parents and caregivers as the "more knowledgeable other" plays a critical role during the early stages of language acquisition, providing the support needed for learners to bridge the gap between the home and school environments (Benson, 2002). Ball (2014) stresses the importance of family involvement in children's language development, emphasising that parents act as their children's first teachers, shaping both linguistic and cognitive growth. As observed by Pascoe (2022) some urban parents teach their children to speak English alongside the home language from a young age in preparation for perceived life opportunities for them.

Despite these efforts, rural learners often face significant challenges in acquiring English proficiency due to limited exposure outside the classroom. Many rural communities in Zimbabwe view English as a foreign language, and its practical utility is often overshadowed by negative perceptions rooted in its colonial history. Maseko and Matunge (2020) note that in some rural areas, English is viewed with skepticism, further complicating learners' motivation to master it. Consequently, rural learners tend to enter high school with limited competence in English, relying entirely on classroom interactions to develop their language skills. This lack of exposure results in low self-confidence and limited vocabulary, leading learners to prefer using their mother tongue during English lessons. Learners frequently revert to vernacular when they struggle to articulate their thoughts in English or lack the vocabulary to express complex ideas. Teachers often resort to code-switching as a strategy to maintain engagement and ensure comprehension. While this approach can enhance

participation in the short term, it hinders learners' ability to fully internalise and use English as the H-variety (Chikasha & Beukes, 2019), hence perform badly in final examinations as they are written in English.

Learners' attitudes toward English are shaped by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Many rural learners lack intrinsic motivation to learn English, viewing it as a utilitarian subject rather than a valuable skill. The absence of role models who demonstrate the benefits of English fluency further exacerbates this issue. However, as learners progress through high school, they begin to develop extrinsic motivation driven by the realisation that English proficiency is essential for academic success and career advancement. Collaborative classroom interactions with teachers and peers help learners build confidence, while the awareness of English as a gateway to higher education and professional opportunities encourages them to persevere (Chitiga, 2021).

The diglossic relationship between English and indigenous languages has a profound impact on educational outcomes in Zimbabwe. In many rural schools, the vernacular predominates in classroom interactions, even during English lessons. This reliance on the L-variety affects learners' proficiency in English, leading to poor performance in both language exams and other subjects taught in English. For instance, Ordinary Level examination results often show most rural learners performing well in vernacular subjects but struggling with English and theoretical subjects that require advanced linguistic skills. Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya (2018) argued that this trend reflects the broader implications of diglossia, where the dominance of vernacular languages in informal settings limits learners' ability to engage with the H-variety in academic contexts. The situation is further complicated by the multilingual nature of many Zimbabwean communities, where learners are often exposed to multiple local languages in addition to English. Teachers, who are also second-language speakers of English, face the dual challenge of mastering the H-variety themselves while teaching it effectively to their students. Figure 1 summarises the responses by learners when asked who else they converse with in English besides their English teachers.

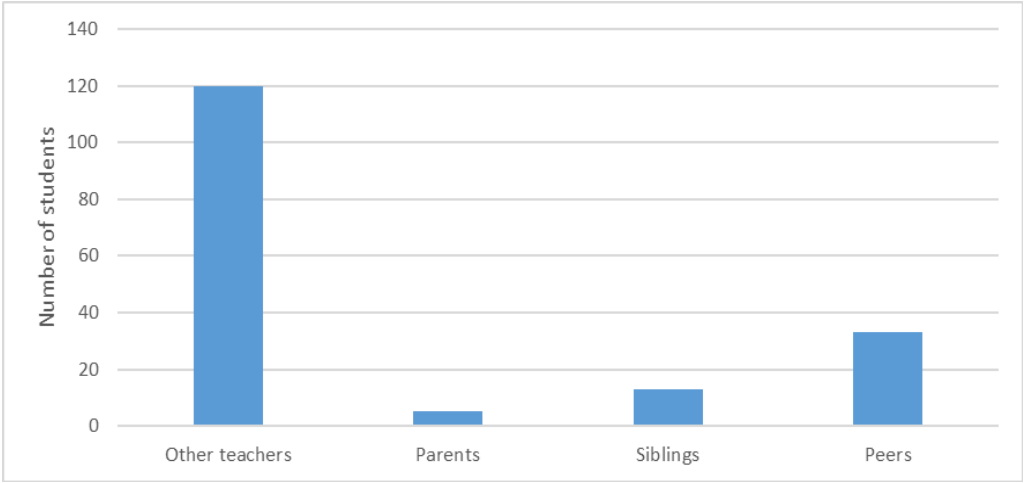

Figure 1: Learner responses when asked who else learners converse with in English besides their English teachers

Findings shown in Figure 1 indicate that learners sometimes use English with peers when interacting outside the classroom. However, exposure to the 'foreign' language outside the schoolyard is limited. Only a few learners mentioned using English at home, and most communicate in English only at school, with their teachers and classmates. Vernacular languages remain dominant in community interactions, reflecting the diglossic relationship where English, as the High (H) variety, is largely restricted to formal and educational contexts (Sithole, 2017).

In urban schools, learners increasingly use English in their daily interactions, and in some families, the Low (L) variety is no longer acquired as the mother tongue. As Hudson (2002) noted, the competition between H and L varieties often results in the displacement of vernaculars. Similarly, linguistic studies focusing on Zimbabwean urban communities show that English has become the primary language for peer conversations, with vernacular words gradually replaced by English terms in everyday use (Mpofu & Salawu, 2018). However, in rural classrooms, teachers face the challenge of working with learners from diverse cultural realities and varying levels of linguistic capital. Teachers often focus on fast learners, leaving slower learners behind due to high teacher-pupil ratios (Maseko & Matunge, 2020).

Results from the study showed that English lessons in the rural school studied are marked by frequent code-switching. Both teachers and learners regularly use the mother tongue to explain concepts, which can hinder English acquisition. Ball (2014) explained that children often struggle to engage in learning tasks when

taught in a foreign language. Consequently, teachers may rely on the L-variety to facilitate understanding, a practice supported in the 1950s by UNESCO, highlighting the cognitive benefits of mother tongue instruction. Nonetheless, overreliance on the vernacular during English lessons compromises learners' ability to develop proficiency in the H-variety. Vygotsky's social interactionist theory advocates for experiential learning and meaningful communication in the target language, suggesting that teachers should provide opportunities for students to use English in authentic contexts (Chitiga, 2021).

Rural learners face additional challenges due to socioeconomic disparities. Urban learners often have greater access to English-language resources, such as books, digital media, and extracurricular activities, which enhance their language skills. In contrast, rural learners rely almost exclusively on classroom instruction to acquire English (Sithole, 2017). Parents in rural areas are less likely to communicate with their children in English, limiting their ability to support schoolwork (Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2018). The unequal access to resources exacerbates the academic gap between rural and urban learners. Rural students often perform poorly in English and other subjects taught in the language, as seen in Ordinary Level examinations. A more inclusive approach to education is needed to address these inequities (Maphosa, 2021).

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the intricate relationship between diglossia, language policy, and educational outcomes in Zimbabwean classrooms. Diglossia in Zimbabwe is a legacy of colonial policies that elevated English as the High (H) variety for governance and education while relegating indigenous languages, such as Shona, Ndebele and other marginalised languages, to the Low (L) variety. This dichotomy continues to shape the education system, as English remains the primary medium of instruction from Grade Four onwards. Although this transition aims to prepare learners for global opportunities, it disproportionately disadvantages rural learners who lack exposure to English outside the classroom (Chapanga & Makamani, 2006; Chitiga, 2021). Rural learners often enter secondary school with minimal proficiency in English, relying on the classroom environment for language acquisition. This contrasts with urban learners, who have greater access to English-language resources and interact with English in their communities. Consequently, rural learners face significant challenges in mastering English, which is critical for academic success and career advancement. The preference for vernacular languages in

rural schools, as highlighted by the results, reflects the limited exposure and negative perceptions of English in these communities (Maseko & Matunge, 2020).

The findings further reveal that English lessons in rural schools are characterised by frequent code-switching, as teachers and learners alternate between English and the mother tongue. While code-switching aids comprehension and engagement, it also hinders learners from developing fluency in English. This finding aligns with Ball's (2014) observation that children struggle with learning tasks when taught exclusively in a foreign language, prompting teachers to rely on the L-variety for explanations. Although in the 1950s the UNESCO advocated for mother tongue instruction in the early years of education, overreliance on vernacular during English lessons compromises learners' ability to internalise the H-variety. Vygotsky's social interactionist theory suggests that meaningful communication in the target language is essential for language acquisition. Teachers must, therefore, strike a balance by providing opportunities for learners to practise English in authentic contexts while gradually reducing their dependence on the vernacular (Chikasha & Beukes, 2019; Chitiga, 2021).

Socioeconomic disparities further exacerbate the challenges faced by rural learners. Urban students benefit from access to English-language resources, including books, digital media, and extracurricular activities, which enhance their linguistic skills. In contrast, rural learners rely almost entirely on classroom instruction, with limited support from their families. As highlighted by the findings, most rural parents communicate with their children in vernacular languages, limiting their ability to assist with English-language learning (Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2018). This unequal access to resources widens the academic gap between rural and urban learners. National Ordinary Level (High School) examination results, for instance, frequently show rural students performing well in vernacular subjects but struggling in English and other theoretical subjects that require advanced linguistic proficiency. These findings align with Maphosa (2021), who emphasised the need for targeted interventions to address these disparities and create a more equitable education system.

The Zimbabwe's language policy, which prioritises English as the medium of instruction, has been criticised for marginalising indigenous languages and failing to accommodate the diverse linguistic realities of learners. The results of this study point to the need for a mother-tongue-based multilingual education model, which has been shown to improve cognitive development and academic performance. Benson and Kosonen (2013) argue that such a model allows

learners to build a strong foundation in their vernacular language before transitioning to English, fostering better comprehension and retention.

In addition to curriculum reforms, community engagement is crucial for shifting negative attitudes toward English in rural areas. Efforts to promote the value of bilingualism and the practical benefits of English proficiency can motivate learners and their families to embrace the language as a tool for empowerment rather than a symbol of colonial oppression (Mpofu & Salawu, 2018).

Conclusions

This study highlighted the significant challenges posed by diglossia in the Zimbabwean education system, particularly regarding the teaching and learning of English as a second language in rural contexts. The diglossic relationship between English as the High (H) variety and local languages as the Low (L) variety is exacerbated by the foreign status of English, which often marginalises indigenous languages and creates educational inequities. Rural learners struggle with English proficiency due to limited exposure outside the classroom, negative attitudes toward the language, and the absence of a supportive linguistic environment. Teachers, likewise, face difficulties balancing the demands of teaching English while accommodating learners' linguistic realities.

The findings reveal that rural learners rely heavily on their mother tongue for comprehension and participation in class. While the use of vernacular facilitates engagement and understanding, it hinders English proficiency when overused. This overreliance on vernacular creates a linguistic gap between the home language and the language of instruction, negatively impacting cognitive development, academic performance, and learners' confidence in using English. Language plays a central role in education as the medium of instruction and a measure of academic success. In Zimbabwe, the English langauge is both a gateway to professional opportunities and a source of marginalisation for rural learners who are unable to master it effectively. The current language policies often exacerbate these inequalities, with urban learners benefiting from greater access to resources and exposure to English, while rural learners are left disadvantaged.

Recommendations

To address the challenges of teaching and learning in a bilingual diglossic context, the following recommendations are proposed:

i) *A mother-tongue-based multilingual education model should be implemented to support learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This model, as advocated by Benson and Kosonen (2013), allows learners to build cognitive and linguistic skills in their vernacular language before transitioning to English. Extending the use of mother tongue beyond primary education ensures that rural learners can engage meaningfully with the curriculum while gradually acquiring proficiency in English.*

ii) *Language policies in the country should value all languages, treat them equitably and address the linguistic gap between urban and rural learners. These policies must consider geographic location, socioeconomic status, and linguistic diversity to provide tailored support for learners. Punitive measures against the use of vernacular in schools should be abolished to foster a positive learning environment. The United Nations' 2021 recommendation on multilingual education should guide reforms, ensuring that policies promote inclusivity and linguistic equity.*

iii) *Effective teacher training programs are critical for equipping educators with strategies to manage multilingual classrooms. Teachers must learn to balance vernacular and English use, employing code-switching strategically to support comprehension while encouraging English practice. Training should also emphasise culturally responsive teaching, recognising the unique needs of learners from diverse backgrounds.*

iv) *Parents and communities may actively engaged in supporting language acquisition. Educating parents on the importance of English proficiency and providing resources to facilitate learning at home can bridge the gap between school and home environments. Collaborative initiatives can help shift negative attitudes toward English in rural areas and foster a supportive linguistic culture.*

v) *Investing in rural education infrastructure is essential to provide equitable access to resources that support English acquisition. This includes libraries, digital tools, and extracurricular programs that expose learners to English in meaningful contexts. Addressing resource disparities between urban and rural schools can level the playing field and improve outcomes for all learners.*

vi) *Teachers may prioritise teaching the functional aspects of English over strict adherence to grammatical conventions. Emphasising real-world applications of English can build learners' confidence and intrinsic motivation. Providing learners with opportunities to use English in authentic, low-pressure situations can reduce fear of mistakes and encourage active participation.*

vii) *The curriculum is expected to reflect the sociolinguistic realities of learners by integrating vernacular and English in a complementary manner. Assessment methods should be adapted to account for learners' varying language capital, ensuring that rural and urban learners are evaluated equitably. Practical reforms can reduce dropout rates and improve pass rates in rural schools.*

Conclusion

The diglossic context of Zimbabwean classrooms presents significant challenges for language acquisition and academic achievement, particularly for rural learners. However, these challenges also provide opportunities for meaningful reform. By implementing multilingual education, revisiting language policies, enhancing teacher training, and addressing resource disparities, Zimbabwe may create an inclusive and equitable education system that values linguistic diversity. Such reforms will empower learners to succeed academically and professionally while preserving the rich cultural heritage of indigenous languages.

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