



# Challenges associated with the teaching and learning of second languages such as English in Zimbabwe's multilingual communities: a case of Mlibizi High School in Binga District of Matabeleland North Region

By

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## Abstract

This research is an analysis of the challenges of teaching English in a multilingual community. The study conducted in the remote areas of Binga district sought to analyze the factors that impede the learning of foreign languages predominantly English which has become the solo means of communication in schools; with particular reference to geographically disadvantaged pupils at Mlibizi High School. The quest to find strategies that can be used by educators to effectively teach such languages was the greatest motivational force behind the carrying out of this research. A sample of 100 participants was drawn from a population 300 individuals comprising students, teachers and parents drawn from the School Development Committee SDC. The selection of students was based on parameters such as their family background and communities in which they reside. The inclusion of teachers facilitated generation

of unbiased data as views of all parties involved in the learning process were captured. The research unpacked unique barriers that hinder learners from mastering foreign languages particularly English; a universal second language in all schools. The research concluded that the main challenges were background and exposure to communities that do not appreciate the significance of such languages in the learning of other subject areas in learning institutions. Majority of the population in the study area is multilingual but in their native languages and as such it is difficult for pupils to master English as an additional language. The research recommended that educators should play an active role in helping pupils counter the challenges associated with the learning of the languages. Varied teaching aids should be used so as to help ease the challenges faced by learners.



**Key words;** second languages, multilingual communities, language competence/incompetence and language proficiency

## 1 Introduction

Almost half of all culturally and linguistically diverse students have limited English language proficiency and are classified as English language learners. An English language learner is one who has to acquire a second or additional language and culture, a process that can be very challenging. The degree of challenge will depend on the personal, pragmatic, and contextual factors students bring to the process as well as how well they regulate the linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional tasks required in language and cultural acquisition. Research indicates that low-income students are usually behind their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds in language and readiness skills and acquiring a second language can be an arduous and slow process. Mlibizi high school has learners from diverse backgrounds, and the objective of this study was to discover how the learners' socio-economic background affects them in the learning of English as a second language. Most pupils come from low-income backgrounds. As such it affects their self-esteem compared to those who come from families of high income in urban centers.

## 2 Background to the study

English is a West-Germanic language which is dominant in the United Kingdom, the United States and other former British colonies. It is estimated that there are 380 million native speakers and 300 million who use English as a second language. Baker (2003) asserts that English is listed as the official Language of over forty-five countries and is spoken extensively in the countries where it has no official status. He goes on to point out that, English plays a part in the cultural, political and economic lives in most countries world over. English is used as a medium of communication in most African countries and Zimbabwe by virtue of being historically a British colony adopted English as an official language and its use became compulsory in all schools. The ability to communicate in English was regarded highly and it was imperative that the acquisition of the language became a necessity in the Zimbabwean education system as one was expected to orally communicate as well as have the ability to write it.

Hammer (2013) opines that a multi-lingual community is one which has people from different ethnic groups living in one community. Binga district has a mixed populace of Tonga, Nyanja, Nambya, Lozwi, Kalanga, Ndebele and Shona speaking people. In the communities, people extensively use their first language to communicate. Thus, it brings about a great



challenge in the learning process because the pupils become bilingual at a very tender age. Moon (2004) asserts that, the difficulty of a language depends on the similarity of one's own language. One may find it easier to learn Nambya if they are Shona because both languages use the same alphabet. Teaching English in a multi-lingual community becomes a challenge because there are a lot of factors that hinder the learner's ability to master English as their second language.

English language is studied in all secondary schools in Zimbabwe. As a second language to the majority of pupils, it is the medium of instruction, thus it dominates the linguistic space in the Zimbabwean education system. According to the Zimbabwean constitution, the English language holds an official position as it is one of the sixteen official languages recognized in the constitution. As a second language it poses serious problems as pupils are found to be-linguistically incompetent. Binga is a multilingual society where predominantly Tonga, Shona, Ndebele, and Nambya are spoken. Hassan Basurally, (2009:9) defines multilingualism as having multiple languages, either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers. The lack of reading, speaking and writing skills among a large number of people is threatening to divide the society into the highly illiterate and low income, low achieving under class equipped for educational advancement (Richel, 1996:3). This is witnessed by learners from such

backgrounds who continuously obtain lower grades hence the need to analyse the influence of a multilingual society to the effective teaching of English language.

It is perceived that the multilingual nature of Binga District has impacted negatively on the teaching and learning of English and other subjects in schools. This research therefore endeavored to investigate how the multilingual nature of individual students may impact on their learning of English which has become a fundamental instructional language in institutions of learning in Zimbabwe.

The research sought to explore why pupils find it difficult to learn English as the failure to acquire the second language has known to impact negatively on the learner's progress, because English proficiency is a prerequisite in the learning of all other subjects. Therefore, a poor command and competence in the language may have serious and negative consequences for the learners. This study strives to determine the challenges that pupils are facing in their learning of English which is assumed to be the major attribute of dismal performance by learners on public examinations. The study focused mainly on pupil's competence on syntax and morphology. The thrust was put on these two aspects mainly because they are the 'heart' of English language. If a pupil cannot construct words or syllables, has challenges with word order and tenses then it is very difficult for that learner to write anything in English, let alone speak it as a language.



## 2.1 Research questions

To address the objectives which guided the direction of the study, this study addressed the following research questions:

- What are the challenges associated with the teaching and learning of English language as a second language in a multilingual community?
- What can be done to assist learners in their learning of second language languages
- What can be done to assist the teachers in order for them to successfully teach English as a second language?

## 3 Methodology

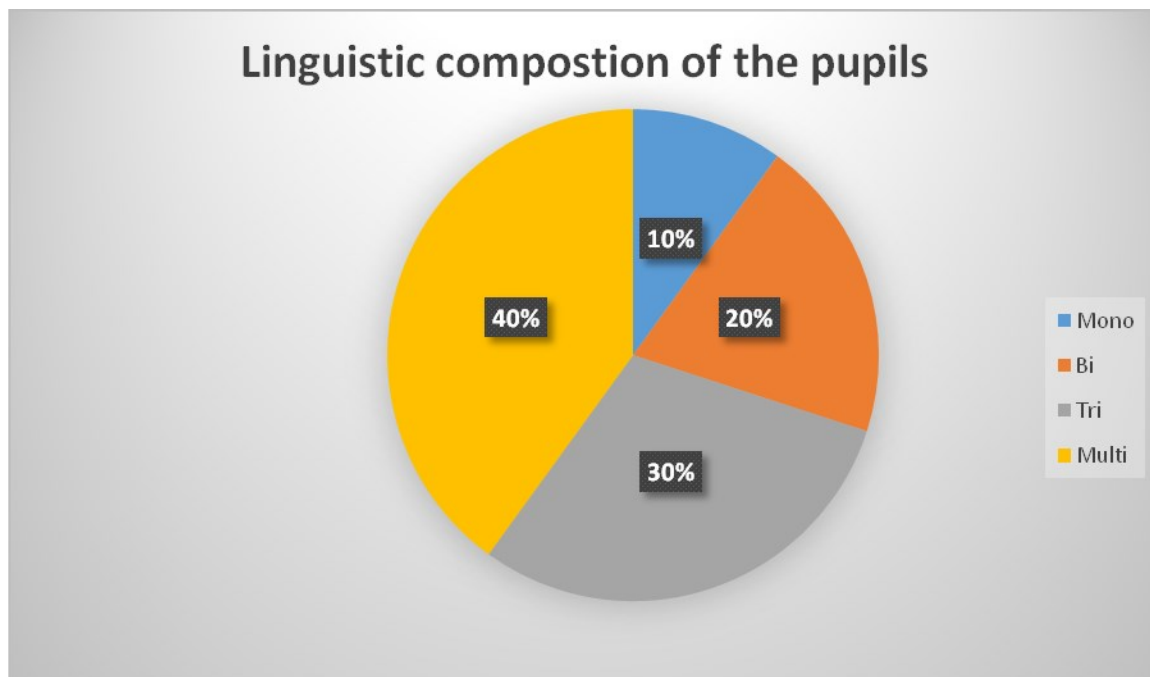
The study sought to explore challenges faced by pupils in the learning of English as a second language in schools and their impact on the overall general performance of learners on other subjects mainly in Zimbabwean secondary schools. 100 participants were conveniently selected from Mlibizi High school in Binga district. These

comprised; learners, teachers, school head and parents in the school development authority SDA. The selection of students was based on parameters such as their family background and communities in which they reside. The inclusion of teachers and other stakeholders facilitated the generation of unbiased data as it enabled the capturing of views of all parties involved in the learning process in the school. A structured questionnaire with close-ended and open ended questions was used to solicit for appropriate information appropriate. Even though closed ended questionnaires are often criticized for being restrictive to respondents who want to add more information to qualify certain responses, thus the addition of open ended questions was meant to provide a platform where respondents would qualify so that their views. The research used qualitative descriptive research design for collecting and analyzing data. Qualitative data provided a detailed explanation of the findings and was used in displaying the findings.

## 4 Results and Discussions

### 4.1 The linguistic composition of Binga District

Key: Mono=*Monolingual*, Bi=*Bilingual*, Tri=*Trilingual*, Multi=*Multilingual*

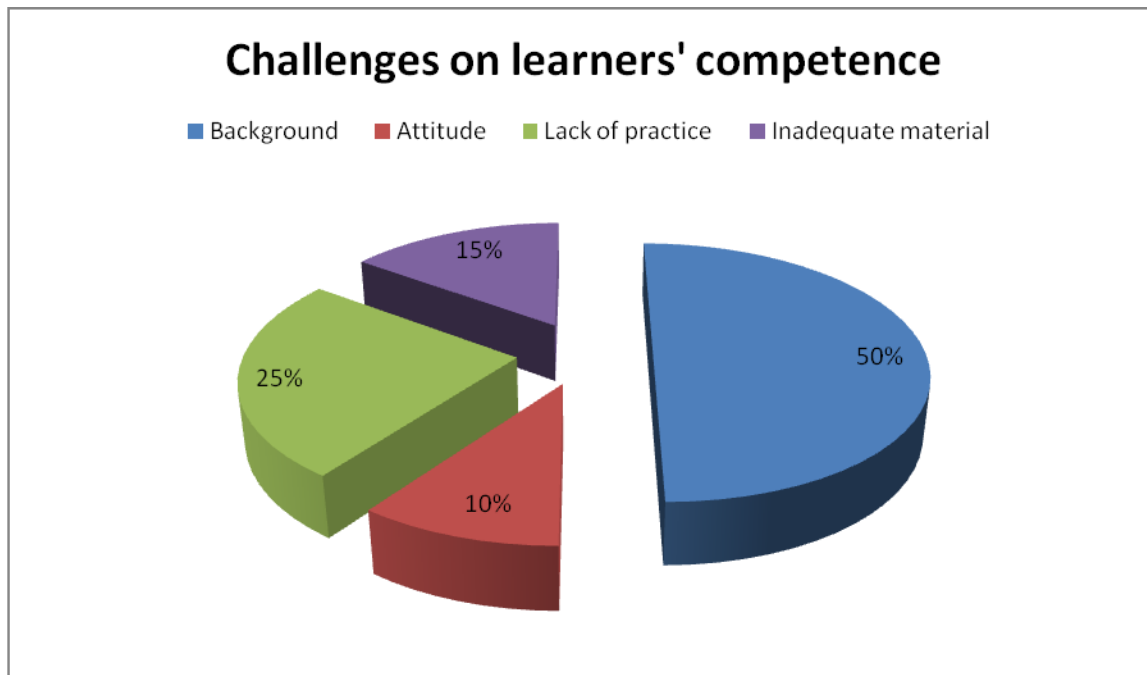


**Figure 4.1: Linguistic composition of Mlibizi High school**

Figure 4.1 shows that 40% of the pupils are multilingual which represents the highest proportion of people in the study area. This can be attributed to the fact that Binga is a multi-ethnic district with people from all walks of life drawn from different parts of the country and neighbouring countries in the region such as Zambia, Botswana and Malawi. Most learners sampled for the purpose of this study were able to speak more than three languages. It was established that 30% of the participants are Trilingual, that is, they are able to function

in at least three languages (excluding English), and 20% of are bilingual. Monolinguals consists of 10% which is the least, thus they can only function in one language, which is their mother tongue/ the native one. This minority group of monolinguals could be people who migrated to the district during the fast track land reform of the year 2000. The immigrant population is composed mainly of people who came from cities such as Harare, Bulawayo and other parts of the country where communities are largely monolingual.

#### 4.2 The main challenges of learners' incompetence



**Figure: 4.2 Challenges on learners' incompetence**

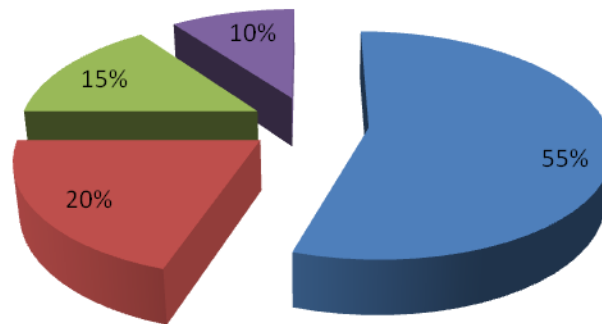
Figure: 4.2 shows that 50% the participants suggest that learners' background is the main challenge of incompetence. Learners' backgrounds impart negatively on their competence. Their guardians and parents and other immediate family suffer from inferiority complex where a second language such as English language is concerned. They view English as a language for the elite therefore they shun speaking it. 10% Of the respondents suggested that attitude is the main challenge of pupils' incompetence. 25% however asserts that pupils just perceive second languages as difficult hence they develop a negative attitude towards such languages. This goes

hand in hand with Krashen's Affective filter hypothesis, Krashen (2003) claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to 'raise' the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In other words, when the filter is 'up' it impedes language acquisition. On the other hand, positive affect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for acquisition to take place.

#### **4.3 What needs to be done to improve the learning and appreciation of second languages?**

## How to promote the learning of second languages in schools

■ Varied teaching methods ■ Public speaking ■ Language use at home ■ Interactive tours



**Figure: 4.3 How to promote learning of second languages in schools**

Figure: 4.3 shows that 55% of the participants suggested that educators should use varied teaching methods blended with materials such as newspapers, magazines and novels to aid the learning process of second languages. 20% suggested that learners need to be exposed to public speaking; be actively involved in debates on issues affecting people's social and economic life in their communities. 15% of the participants suggested that second languages such as English should be used as a medium of communication not only at school but even at home and in the entire community. It was established that considerable time is required to claim

competence in academic aspects of the second language. This concurs well with Collier (1987), Klesmer (1994) and Cummins (2000) who propose the interval of at least 5 years of continued practice" to achieve a good level of appropriate academic proficiency in the second language. Academic proficiency is assumed to cover writing skills, reading comprehension and knowledge of a range of vocabulary repertoire. As such, educationists need to revise the existing policy so that it suites the learner's needs. The policies should accommodate all learners regardless of their diverse challenges.





## 5 Conclusions

From this research, it emerged that 40% of the pupils at Mlibizi High School are multilingual and they find it difficult to master English. 55% of the pupils have a negative attitude towards the language and as such they think English is difficult. Majority of pupils have challenges in reading and writing and the study found that 50% of the pupils' incompetence is influenced by background, whilst 33% is influenced by attitude while 17% of the pupils simply lack practice of the language. The findings reveal that learners assume that educators should help them more on reading so that they master the language. On the other hand, educators suggested that learners do not have a reading culture as they come from backgrounds where tradition prioritises native languages. It is therefore imperative that the study established that learners' family backgrounds largely contribute to the failure to master foreign languages by the learner, as use of such languages is largely confined to the class room; hence not used at home or anywhere else.

## 6 Recommendations

- During lesson delivery of English Language lessons, pupils should be involved in interactive learning activities such as public speaking, debates and quizzes to improve their language. And as such learning

should be learner centred because involving pupils helps pupils to understand better.

- Teachers should encourage learners to use English as a medium of communication especially in English lessons. As the study proved that most learners have difficulties to communicate in English because of lack confidence. They are shy to speak in English because they fear making mistakes
- Teachers should be innovative, make use of different types of media when teaching English, media such as cartoons, newspaper cuttings and other teaching aids which will catch the pupils attention.
- Educators should identify pupils' weakness in language and choose appropriate approaches to assist them. They should put it into consideration that pupils have different challenges as such teachers should come up with different ways to help pupils.
- Learners need to develop an interest on reading and practice speaking because that is the only way they can improve their language. Interactive Tours to





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