Using an Indigenous Language As A Medium of Instruction in Primary Schools in the Kingdom of Eswatini: Insights and Views from Parents

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Abstract: This study sought to establish insights and views of parents on the use of an indigenous language as a medium of instruction at primary school level in the kingdom of Eswatini. The study employed the qualitative approach where a case study research design was utilised. Data were collected from ten (10) parents who were randomly selected who had children in one primary school in the Manzini region of Eswatini. One on one interviews were used to collect data from the sampled parents. Data were analysed for content and conclusions were drawn. The main finding of the study was that parents did not support the use of an indigenous language as a medium of instruction at primary school level. The study also found that parents preferred the use of a second language, English, as a medium of instruction for all grade levels at primary school. Another finding was that parents felt that the indigenous language was of little value on the education of primary school learners because English is not only a passing/failing subject in schools, but curriculum materials for all the subjects at primary school level are written in the English language with the exception of siSwati materials. The study therefore concludes that parents perceive siSwati, the indigenous language, as low in status compared to the English language. The study further concludes that parents prefer that English should be used as a medium of instruction in all grades at primary school level. The main recommendation of the study is that English should not be a passing/failing subject in the grade 7 external examination or any other examination.

Keywords: Indigenous, Medium, Instruction, Insights.

1. Introduction

The issue of which language to use in schools has been a combative one for all countries that were once colonies. These countries found themselves in dilemmas as they had to decide on the language to use in schools after they had attained their independence (UNESCO, 2010). The trend with
most of these countries has been that even after independence the language of the colonisers continued to be used in schools as both a medium of instruction and a passing/failing subject. The same trend has been observed in the kingdom of Eswatini where English was used in schools before and after the country became independent in 1968. It was until 2011 when the Language in Education Policy was put into place and launched by the Ministry of Education in the kingdom of Eswatini that teachers became aware of the language that they were supposed to use as a medium of instruction for the first 4 grade levels (The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy, 2011).

2. Background to the study

Africa is the only continent where learners are taught in either a foreign or second language, more especially in the first 4 grade levels. This is premised on the belief that the foreign/second languages are of great educational and economic benefit to these African countries as they enable Africans to interact with people from other countries in the globe (UNESCO, 2010). This however is not true as research reveals that education conducted through the use of these languages often results to low quality education as the learners have to grapple with both the new content and the language that is used for presenting the new content. It is for this reason therefore that UNESCO (2010) recommends the use of African languages as both medium of instruction and language for the examinations in schools.

According to The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy (2011) since Eswatini became independent in 1968, the Ministry of Education operated on individual documents to guide its operations. This therefore, makes The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy (2011) the first document to be used by the ministry to provide guidance on all issues that touch on education, issues of language included. Article 7.4 of the policy states that both English and SiSwati are official languages in the country and therefore have an equal status both in the country and in the education sector. The policy further directs that despite the equal status that is held by these two languages, “the mother tongue shall be used as a medium of instruction in the first four grade levels of primary school, after which English shall be the medium of instruction” (The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy, 2011p.27). The policy further stipulates that both English and SiSwati shall continue to be taught as core subjects of the school curriculum; however, “as a way of promoting the learning of SiSwati in all schools, children shall not be punished for speaking SiSwati within and outside the school premises” (The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy, 2011,p.27).

Of importance to note is that the latter clause of the article is referring to a practice that had become a norm in most schools where children were forced to speak English both within and outside the school premises so that they did not encounter any problems with English since it was, and still is a passing/failing subject. Worth noting also is that despite the launching of the Language in Education Policy (2011) English still remains a passing/failing subject, a requirement for entry into most institutions of higher learning, and a requirement for consideration for the award of a scholarship (Simelane, 2006).

Another important thing to note is that since the Eswatini primary school program is a 7 year program, according to the policy, for 4 years, primary school learners from grade 1-4 will receive instruction in SiSwati, and will only receive instruction in English: a language that is used to decide whether they are progressing to secondary school or not, for 3 years, and this time may not be adequate in ensuring that learners pass the subject.

3. Statement of the problem

In the Kingdom of Eswatini learners can only progress to secondary school if they pass English, yet the Language in Education Policy (2011) stipulates that SiSwati, the indigenous language of the Eswatini people, should be used as a medium of instruction in the first four grade levels (Language in Education Policy, 2011). This means that out of the seven years expected to complete primary school level, learners are given instruction in the mother tongue for four years, yet at the end of seven years they are supposed to pass English. All curriculum materials for primary school learners are written in English with the exception of SiSwati materials. This therefore, renders English an important language
as well as subject in the primary school curriculum which learners have to be competent in, for them to progress smoothly with their education.

4. Objectives of the study
The objectives of the study were to:
   a. Establish parents’ views on the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction at primary school level.
   b. Explore the parents’ views on the benefits of using siSwati as a medium of instruction at primary school level.
   c. Determine the challenges of the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction at primary school level.

5. The main research questions of the study
The study was based on the following research questions:
   a. What are the parents’ views on the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction at primary school level?
   b. What are the parents’ views on the benefits of using siSwati as a medium of instruction at primary school level?
   c. What are the challenges of the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction at primary school level?

6. Theoretical Framework
The study was underpinned in the Social Linguistic theory of language attitudes in Su-Saharan Africa. This theory was formulated by Adegbija (1994) and it is based on the notion that indigenous African languages have been abandoned and have been replaced with European languages by most African countries. This act by Africans has reduced the value of the indigenous languages so that more value is now attached to the European Languages. Adegbija(1994) posits that one of the reasons why Africans attach so much value to European languages is because they consider Europeans as conquerors of Africa as they were able to colonise most African countries. Another reason is that the Europeans put in place language policies that would ensure that their own languages had more value than the African languages and this resulted in the European languages being used in important places as well as being used as medium of instruction or subjects of value in the schools such as passing/failing subjects.

   Adegbija (1994) also makes the observation that even in countries where indigenous African Languages are used as medium of instruction in schools, this is only done for the first four grade levels of primary school learning and this gives the impression that indigenous African languages are only suitable for use in the lower levels of primary school and are not suitable for use in higher levels. Such a view and treatment of indigenous African languages will make the languages to fester unless a new view and treatment of these languages is adopted more especially in the school system (Adegbija, 1994)

   In our view the situation on indigenous African languages more especially in the school system in Swaziland is similar to what Adegbija (1994) is talking about because for a long time emphasis has been on the European language where learners were forced to speak in English while at school and even after the pronouncement of the Language in Education Policy (2011) emphasis is on the use of indigenous languages only in the lower grade levels after which English has to continue being used. In addition to English being used as a medium of instruction it is also used as a measure for the learners’ progression from one grade level to the next and this further raises the position of English in the education system of Swaziland and disadvantages the indigenous siSwati language.

   Adegbija’s theory therefore assisted the researchers to appropriately align the responses that the parents gave with regards to their views on the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction in the first four grade levels of primary school.
7. The state of indigenous languages in African countries

Available literature on indigenous languages reveals that these languages are now in a critical situation and this therefore requires urgent action to ensure that the situation does not become worse than it already is (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Giving an insight into this situation the Commonwealth of Australia (2008) says the continued use of languages of the colonisers more especially as medium of instruction in schools has led to the endangerment of indigenous languages. The realisation that indigenous languages are now endangered has led to many countries or communities working hard to either maintain or revive them and this has seen most education systems advocating for their use as medium of instruction in schools. Policies and revised education acts have emerged for purposes of ensuring that the languages are preserved and also to enhance learner performance in all subjects taught.

In Zimbabwe, the revision of the Education Act in 2006 obligated the use of indigenous languages as medium of instruction in primary schools (Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2010). Presently however, the medium of instruction that is used in Zimbabwe is English (Thondhlana, 2017). According to Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya (2010) the continued use of English as a medium of instruction in Zimbabwe has created confusion to both teachers and learners as they no longer know the appropriate language to use. This is because while most teachers and learners prefer to use local languages in class, examinations and the world of work still demand English (Thondhlana, 2017). Some teachers in Zimbabwe prefer teaching the indigenous languages in English and the learners do the same thing when they have been given a choice, more especially when writing their Shona or Ndebele essays (Chiwome, & Thondhlama, 1992 cited in Thondhlama, 2017). This has made English to continue dominating the education system resulting in serious consequences for educational development in Zimbabwe. Something similar has been observed in Swaziland. The launching of the Language in Education Policy (2011) pre-supposed changes with regards to the position and status of English in the education system of Swaziland particularly the examinations and entry into institutions of higher learning. However, it has been noted that English is still used in examinations, as a requirement for entry in most institutions of higher learning, as a passing/failing subject, and as a requirement for consideration for the award of a scholarship.

The continued use of English as a medium of instruction is challenging to both the teachers and the learners (Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2010). Learner participation decreases, teachers fail to maintain the required rapport with learners, whereas the use of indigenous languages increases learner participation and enables the teacher to create a good rapport with learners. English also blocks learners from communicating and participating effectively in class (Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2010). It is in the view of this observation that Ngugi (1994) decries the use of English as a medium of instruction in African countries because he regards it as foreign as it forces the learners to live in two separate worlds and cultures.

8. Benefits of using an indigenous language as a medium of instruction in schools

Research indicates that there is a lot that learners stand to benefit when the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction more especially in the early grades of their education. Kioko (2015) declares that the use of the mother tongue in the early years of one’s education enables them to understand with ease the concepts and the content that they are taught. It also develops in the learners a positive attitude towards school and learning in general. Kioko (2015) also makes the observation that since children are negatively affected by abrupt changes in their routines, it becomes too much for them to change both the medium of communication and the centre of authority when they get to school. He says that this is because learning starts at home where the medium of instruction is the mother tongue and the centre of authority is the parents and when they get to school the centre of authority becomes the teacher and this may overwhelm the learners. If again upon getting to school the learners have to adopt another language for communicating they can get even more overwhelmed and this can make learning challenging. Kioko (2015) further points out that for learners who are starting school it is not just the language and the teacher that are foreign as the classroom and classmates are also new, hence foreign. Kioko’s view on the benefits that the mother tongue has when it is used as a medium of instruction is supported by Mawere, Tshabalala, and Mapolisa (2015) who state that mother
tongue usage as a medium of instruction is a practice that is supported by psychologists as they believe that children understand concepts better if the concepts are taught using a language that the children speak at home and that children develop faster intellectually, psychologically, and cognitively if they are taught using the mother tongue. While Kioko (2015) supports the use of an indigenous language as a medium of instruction more especially in lower grade levels, Mawere, Tshabalala, and Mapolisa (2015) feel that though the benefits are there, the weaknesses however outweigh the benefits, which is why the parents who took part in their study said they wanted their children to be taught in English language because for them the standard of one’s education is measured in terms of their ability to speak English language.

According to Kiya (2008) language plays a very important role in the classroom as it is used to communicate ideas, views, concepts, and knowledge that the teacher wants the learners to have. Teachers also use language to ask questions, elaborate and explain concepts, as well as give feedback to the learners. All of this is however disrupted if the language that is used is foreign; hence the mother tongue is always preferred as a medium of instruction.

The main function of the medium of instruction is to facilitate the learning of the subject content and is also a means by which learners reflect on different facts and viewpoints in order to construct a new view point of the world including the meanings they attribute to the new concepts they are introduced to and the values they attach to them (Kyeyune, 2003, p.175). What this means is that the language that is used as a medium of instruction is important as it ensures that learners benefit from the teaching/learning process and learners also use the language in which the instruction was given to understand the concepts and the content that is taught. If learners have a challenge with the medium used for instruction it would be difficult for them to understand both the content and the concepts taught. Learners’ understanding of what they are taught is therefore facilitated by the medium that is used when the concepts are presented and therefore it is always best that the medium used be the mother tongue. Kioko (2015) views the use of any other language other than the indigenous language as promoting a teacher centred kind of teaching as communication will be one sided, that is, it is the teacher who will be saying most of the things due to the learners’ low proficiency in the language that is used as a medium of instruction. For Murray and Scarino (2014) learners who have little exposure to a particular language will always have problems understanding what they are taught if that language is used as a medium of instruction. This therefore renders mother tongue instruction ideal.

9. Research Design and Methodology

The study was established using the qualitative approach where the case study research design was employed. According to The Expert Independent Researchers (2016) the qualitative research design is a method that is appropriate for exploring people’s attitudes, views, insights, and beliefs, hence its use in the study. Leedy (2001) claims that the case study is suitable in instances where an investigation is done for purposes of learning more about a little known or poorly understood situation. This allegation is further supported by Baxter and Jack (2008) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) where they concur that in instances where the researcher wants to learn more about a little known situation or phenomenon, the case study is the ideal design to use. The issue of the use of an indigenous language (siSwati) as a medium of instruction is new since it has just been pronounced in the Education Sector Policy (2011) and therefore not much is known about it. It was on the basis of this reason therefore that it was used in this study.

Case studies according to Rule and John (2011) can be used on individuals, processes, classrooms, institutions, or countries. These theorists further say that case studies can be used to describe the implementation of a program or a policy. The use of siSwati as a medium of instruction in the primary school falls under the category of a policy and can therefore be treated as a case if Rule and John’s assertion is considered. The use of qualitative research on the other hand is done to unearth tendencies in thoughts, views, and opinions, and plunges deeper into the problem (Leedy, 2001; Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Qualitative data in this study were gathered from ten (10) parents of children who are at primary school level. The ten parents were divided into two focus groups of five parents each. Each of the groups were named A and B and numerals from 1-5 were used so that during data presentation the
parents were referred to as focus group A parent 1, or focus group B parent 2 and so on. Purposive sampling was used to select the parents from where the data were collected. This kind of a sample is used where the people who supposedly have the information that is required are the ones that are chosen to take part in the study (Palinkas, 2013; Rule & John, 2011). The sample of parents that was purposively selected for the study consisted of parents who had children that were doing grade 1-4. One on one interviews were used to solicit information from the parents. The responses from the parents were read several times and themes emerged. The themes/research questions were then used as sub topics under which the discussions were done.

The data were analysed using thematic content analysis where mostly the parents’ responses were quoted verbatim. The direct quotes from the parents make the reader to feel like he/she was also at the site when the data were collected (Thomas & Nelson, 2001).

10. Data analysis and Discussions
The analysis of data was based on the three main research questions that the study intended to answer, and these were:

a. What are the parents’ views on the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction at primary school level?
b. What are the parents’ views on the benefits of using siSwati as a medium of instruction at primary school level?
c. What are the challenges of the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction at primary school level?

11. Parents’ views and insights on the use of an indigenous language as a medium of instruction
The study revealed that all the parents that took part in the study preferred that English, and not an indigenous language be used as a medium of instruction for all grade levels at primary school level. According to the parents there is very little value that can be attached to siSwati, the indigenous language of the Swazi people, particularly in the education system of Swaziland. According to the parents’ views despite that both English and siSwati were compulsory subjects at primary school level, a learner who fails siSwati was allowed to proceed to the next grade level while with English the case was different as learners were not allowed to proceed if they fail. Explaining what happens when learners fail English some of the parents had this to say:

*Using siSwati as a medium of instruction has no value to the learners at all because the learners have to pass English for them to proceed to secondary school. Learners will not proceed to form 1 if they fail English and pass siSwati. Therefore instruction has to be in English so that learners will not have problems with it* (Parent 2 Focus group A).

For this parent what renders the siSwati valueless is the fact that if learners fail it they will be allowed to proceed to the next grade level but if they fail English they will not. This state of affairs about English therefore makes English to be considered more important in education that SiSwati. Another parent made the following observation on the use of an indigenous language as a medium of instruction:

*If teachers would use siSwati as a medium of instruction yet learners are expected to pass English for them to proceed they would find themselves having to teach large numbers because most of the learners would fail. Why would they teach in a language which they know is not going to benefit the learners in the end?* (Parent 5 Focus group A).

Again the argument presented by this parent is that teacher’s use of siSwati as a medium of instruction would result in many learners failing and repeating. For him it is pointless for teachers to use a language that will not help the learners to proceed. Another teacher also had this to say:

*I don’t understand why teachers would want to teach in a language that has not been used for writing materials and books for almost all the subjects that are done at school. The use of siSwati when teaching will only benefit learners in siSwati, whereas the use of English will benefit the learners in almost all the subjects that are offered in the school curriculum.* (Parent 1 Focus group B).

For this parent English and not siSwati should be used as medium of instruction because all curriculum materials with the exception of siSwati materials are written in English. To ensure that
learners benefit from the curriculum materials this parent is of the view that English should be used as a medium of instruction.

I am not for the idea of using siSwati as a medium of instruction in grade 1-4 and my argument is based on that examination questions for all subjects in grade 7 are in English with the exception of siSwati examinations. This therefore makes it vital that learners are taught in English so that they have both a good command in the language as well as competency so that they can understand what the examination questions require of them (Parent 4 Focus group B).

The support for the use of English as a medium of instruction for this parent is based on the notion that examination questions for all subjects with the exception of siSwati are asked in English. That being the case the parent’s view is that learners need to have a good command as well as be proficient in English so that they will not have challenges understanding the examination questions. Another parent had this to say with regards to the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction at primary school level: We send our children to school so that they can learn what they do not know. If schools decide to teach learners in a language that they know and leave that which learners do not know that is a problem (Parent 5 Focus group B).

This parent feels that English and not siSwati should be used as a medium of instruction because when parents send their children to school they send them so that they can be taught what they do not know. Since by the time learners get to school they already know the siSwati language the parent therefore feels English has to be used to give instruction because it is a language that the learners do not know. For them to be said to have learnt something at school they should understand instruction in the new language.

If teachers only start using English as a medium of instruction in grade 5 it means learners only have 3 years where the medium of instruction is English yet at the end of their primary school learning they will be measured by how well they have done in English (Parent 4 Focus group A). For this parent learners need to have instruction in English for more years because at the end of their primary school the learners’ performance will be measured on their performance in English. Early exposure to English will give the learners a head start in the language. This is why we take our children to English medium pre-schools. The policy is now taking us back (Parent 1 Focus group A).

This parent feels that the policy is thwarting the parents’ effort by making learners to receive instruction in the mother tongue when the parents make an effort to ensure that learners get the opportunity to get instruction in the English language even before they get to grade one. According to her the reason why they take their children to English medium pre-schools is because they do not want their children to have problems with English. If after the effort that they make the policy now dictates that SiSwati be used as a medium of instruction the policy is thwarting their effort. A person’s education is measured by their command of the English Language so we don’t want our children to be disadvantaged by such policies (Parent 3 Focus group A).

For this parent education is measured by the learner’s command of the English language and such a command can be attained if the language is used as a medium of instruction. She is of the view that the learners will be disadvantaged if they are taught in siSwati because they will not have a good command of the English language. As long as English is still a passing/failing subject it is going to be difficult for us parents to accept the use of an indigenous language as a medium of instruction (Parent 2 Focus group B).

This parent felt that the continued use of English as a passing/failing subject made it difficult for them as parents to accept the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction. In other words if English could cease to be a passing/failing subject this parent would not have a problem with siSwati being used as a medium of instruction.

If government has decided to put this policy in place all private schools where English is used as a medium of instruction should be closed because we want all children in the country to be even when it comes to their education. Let us see if the people at the top will want their children taught in siSwati (Parent 4 Focus group B).

For this parent, declaring the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction would result in the country’s learners not being the same with regards to their command of the English language. For her
this policy is meant to disadvantage learners in public schools whose parents do not afford private schools so that the children who come from homes where parents’ economic status allows them to enrol in private schools can be seen to be better with regards to their command of the English language.

The parents’ views on the use of siSwati as a medium of instruction reveals their attitude towards their indigenous language. All the parents in the study seemed to have a negative attitude towards their own language. These attitudes are similar to those identified by Adegbija (1994) in his Social Linguistic Theory. All the parents in the study were prepared to abandon their indigenous language siSwati, and replace it with a European language English. Thus reducing the value of the indigenous language and attaching more value to the European language. The parents’ views also indicated their lack of knowledge of the benefits of using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction more especially in the early grades of primary school level so that learners cannot be overwhelmed by their transition from home to school which would consist only of foreign things if the medium of instruction used would be English, yet the school, the classroom, and the teacher would also be foreign (Kioko, 2015).

In addition, the parents’ views indicated their lack of understanding of the vital role that a language plays in the classroom which include among other things, communicating ideas, views, concepts, and knowledge that the teacher wants the learners to have, and also that the language ensures active participation of the learners as they understand the language that is used as a medium of instruction (Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya, 2010). The parents’ views and their advocating for the use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction also depict their lack of understanding that they are exposing their indigenous language to the danger of becoming extinct (Adegbija, 1994).

12. Recommendations

Based on the findings from the study, the study therefore recommends that English should not be a passing/failing subject in the grade 7 external examinations or any other examination.

13. Conclusions

Based on the findings from the study we therefore conclude that Swazi parents prefer that English, and not an indigenous language be used as a medium of instruction for all grade levels. This is because according to them there is nothing that learners stand to gain from siSwati because siSwati does not hold much value in the education system of Swaziland. Despite that the two subjects/languages are official/compulsory subjects in the school curriculum, while learners can progress to the next grade level if they fail siSwati; they cannot proceed if they fail English. Parents therefore feel that in consideration of this practice that is currently obtaining in the education system of Swaziland, an indigenous language should not be used as a medium of instruction. This assertion by parents revealed that parents did not understand the benefits of the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction more especially for the early grade levels. We further conclude that some parents however would not really mind if the indigenous language, siSwati, could be used as a medium of instruction if only English would not be made a passing/failing subject in the schools.

14. References


