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Educational Language Policies in Nigeria and Zimbabwe: The Role of Educational Inclusion

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Abstract

Educational language policies in African countries are controversial as their colonial legacies continue to undervalue indigenous African languages (Sibomana, 2015). These policies, such as the Education Act (1987) in Zimbabwe, influences the future of African children as they do not always support linguistic inclusion, which in turn may impact the social, economic and national development of a country. While this context is applicable to most African countries, few comparative studies to date have been undertaken to explore this subject in more depth. To address this gap, this study is the first to examine the need for educational inclusion in the language policies of Nigeria and Zimbabwe, two of the continent's largest economies, as both have a two-language system (Anukaenyi, 2019) and English is still hegemonic (Chivhanga and Chimhenga, 2013). The study is based on the premise that detrimental medium of instruction policies at the national level can damage learning, access and inclusion (Cele, 2021). The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses) guided the critical review of 80 publications in the study which spanned more than two decades (2000-2024). Findings suggest that the policies have encouraged the marginalisation of indigenous languages and harmed students, as their learning continues to take place in an unfamiliar

language. Furthermore, the language policies in both countries have also promoted inequality as they have not been implemented in private schools. The study recommends the need for more comparative research on the importance of inclusive teaching and learning of English alongside learners' indigenous languages to improve effective and equitable policy implementation.

Keywords: Educational language policy, language of instruction, inclusive education, Nigeria, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Language policy is an essential area for research on communication, the key to social inclusion and a hub of human activities that is vital for the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (Woodbridge, 2015). Its importance in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) in particular cannot be underemphasized. The argument that everyone is entitled to the right to a quality education is a central objective of SDG 4 (UNESCO, 2015, 2023). While there are numerous examples of governments in low- and middle-income countries developing language policies to contribute to the achievement of this objective, no research studies have as yet been conducted on national language policies in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, which are two of the continent's leading post-colonial economies (Hng'ombe and Mumpande, 2020; Mokibelo, Akinkurolere and Mhindu, 2024).

Nigeria and Zimbabwe were British colonies. Nigeria attained independence in 1960, while Zimbabwe followed suit two decades later with Nigeria playing a prominent role in its attainment (Salau, 2018). These two highly multi-ethnic countries are located in sub-Saharan Africa and have 520 and 16 indigenous languages respectively. They have major and minor languages: Nigeria has three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), while Zimbabwe possesses two (Shona and Ndebele) (Hungwe, 2007). The major languages of Nigeria belong to the Afro-Asiatic and Niger-Congo language families respectively, while Shona and Ndebele are Bantu languages from the Niger-Congo family (Bendor-Samuel, 2025). Indigenous languages are recognised as the medium of instruction in lower primary classes in both countries (NLP, 2022; Government of Zimbabwe, 2006).

This study is original in that no comparative analysis of these two countries' national language policy in relation to educational inclusion has yet been undertaken. Both countries share similar contexts as English is perceived as a symbol of national unity (Tom-Lawyer, 2011; Yusuf, 2012,). English is the preferred language of education (Tom-Lawyer, 2007; Mushina, 2019) and neither country's educational policies have been fully

implemented (Thondhlana, 2000; Nhongo, 2013; Mufenchiya & Mufenchiya, cited in Sibanda, 2019). Arising from this context, the objectives of this first comparative critical review of their language policies are to investigate the link between students who do not learn in their mother tongue and the dropout rate in secondary education (Heugh, 2006); how earlier language policies in both countries were not effectively implemented; and in what ways this may have created social inequality by denying pupils access to quality education, and creating a divide in the status of languages, especially in relation to minor and major languages (Obanya, 1999; Bamgbose, 2000; Ouane, 2003 & Alidou, 2004; cited in Heugh, 2006).

Literature Review

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education policies aim to enable a just and egalitarian society. It is an essential component for peaceful coexistence and development in any society and education is central to its achievement and associated notions of equity. UNESCO (2017, p.7) defines inclusion in education as “a process that helps overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners”, while Operti (2017) regards it as recognition for every individual in the school system. UNESCO (2017) asserts that inclusion entails equity, fairness, accessibility and therefore, every individual has a right to education. Again, according to UNESCO (2009, p.3):

inclusive education is currently considered to be an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all, while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination.

Language policies have implications that can lead to the exclusion and/or inclusion of learners. UNESCO (2023) notes in this respect that in the global context, every fifth child, teenager or young person faces inclusion challenges, such as learning in an unfamiliar language. In addition, approximately 40% of children are denied education in their mother tongue (ibid). Kart and Kart (2021) opine that inclusion in education also encompasses both disabled learners and minority languages learners.

While researchers have explored extensively the impact of inclusion on children with disabilities, more research on its effect on general education is required (Kart and Kart, 2021). Inclusion promotes the schooling of learners from diverse groups (UNICEF, 2025) and an inclusive classroom can create an enabling environment for the benefit of all learners. Some of the benefits of inclusion in education are that students develop empathy and

tolerance for one another. It can also promote learning through interaction, reduce racism and improve educational outcomes (Kart and Kart, 2021; Pradhan and Naik, 2024).

One major factor that affects inclusion in schools is language. If students do not understand the language of instruction, they will feel awkward and be potentially excluded. An emphasis on inclusion in educational language policies impacts not just the implementation of the policies but also classroom practices. This demonstrates that classroom teachers are fundamental to implementing inclusion policies in education and the provision of quality education (Florian and Rouse, 2009; cited in Fettes and Karamouzian, 2018), as well as the implementation of language policies at the local level. Therefore, pre- and in-service teacher training is an important part of developing and realising inclusive education policies in the professional practice of teachers (Fettes and Karamouzian, 2018).

Other collaborators in the achievement of educational inclusion are educational stakeholders, policy makers, educational authorities, parents and the wider civil society (Stefanski, Valli and Jacobson, 2016; cited in Jegede, Yusuf and Aliyu, 2024). Hence, the effective inclusion of learners from different linguistic backgrounds requires schools, universities and the broader society to be genuinely committed to inclusion as a core value (Fettes and Karamouzian, 2018). Language policies that promote educational inclusion need to be effectively implemented for students to access education and achieve quality education, and this is particularly the case in Africa, where UNESCO (2016) has linked inclusive education policy to excellence in education.

Education Language Policy in African States

Language policy has been defined as “a set of measures adopted by a state with regard to one or more languages spoken in the territory under its sovereignty, in order to modify their corpus or status, generally to reinforce their use and sometimes limit their expansion” (Adeline, n.d, p.2). In other words, language policy demonstrates the value placed on different languages in a particular society (Liddicoat, 2023). The factors that shape a language policy are “the state of languages [sic], the structure of political power, and official ideologies in the country” (Ibrahimov, 2023, p.1). The state of languages in any country is synonymous with the structure of political and official ideologies and beliefs, as well as the core principles of a country.

Most language policies in Africa can be traced to the division of countries on the continent by the colonial powers (Awuor, 2019). The Germans, the Dutch and the British promoted the use of indigenous languages as the medium of instruction at the lower levels of education, while the Portuguese rejected their use altogether (Abdulaziz, 2002). Since

the colonial period, many African countries have maintained the status quo in relation to these inherited policies.

African policies are characterised by the use of exoglossic languages such as French and English, alongside indigenous languages (Kangira, 2016). Similarly, Heugh (2006), writing on language-education-policies in Africa, asserts that the policies are at variance with the realities in various language communities, and that they remain to this day, a continuation of former colonial policies. In the same vein, Akumbu and Chiator (2022) opine that African governments are not willing to enforce policy reforms and therefore disregard the value of indigenous languages.

According to Akumbu and Chiator (2013), whose research examined the case of six countries (Tanzania, Nigeria, Cameroon, Malawi, South Africa and Ethiopia), language policies have been encumbered by challenges accompanying implementation. Moreover, Muzoora, Terry and Asimwe (2014) have asserted that education-language-policies in Africa do not enable positive achievement by pupils. According to Bamgbose (1991; cited in Umoren 2019, p. 197), “language policies in African countries are characterized by one or more of the following problems: avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuations and declaration without implementation”.

In the context of this study, using the characteristics stated above as a lens, while Nigeria and Zimbabwe have adopted English alongside indigenous languages as a medium of instruction, they still have the problem of implementation, as English is used as a medium of instruction at all levels of education. Students in both countries do not perform well in English in high school examinations and research studies have identified how the marginalisation of minority languages remains a significant obstacle (Jegade, Yusuf and Aliyu, 2024, Kadenge and Nkomo, 2011). However, scholars are beginning to advocate for a more inclusive approach to language policy development in Africa, and opine that English should be studied alongside the indigenous languages rather than in place of them (Jegade, Yusuf and Aliyu, 2024; Alaku, Okpala and Sule, 2023; Kadenge and Nkomo, 2011; Umunnakwe, 2017).

English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Africa

English medium instruction denotes “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself in countries or jurisdictions, where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro, 2018, p. 19). English as a medium of instruction (EMI), hereafter written as EMI is highly contentious as it is viewed as both an opportunity as well as a bane. Numerous arguments have been identified to justify its use, and while the majority of countries that were colonised by

the British have implemented EMI, research favours the use of mother tongue language policies in primary schools (Opare-Kumi, 2024). Those who favour the use of English, do so because they emphasize its status as a global language thereby highlighting the opportunities for a country's socio-economic development. Moreover, the use of English in early years' education is bound to the belief of some parents that early exposure to English impacts educational achievement and the medium of instruction positively affects students' learning outcomes (Opare-Kumi, 2024).

On the other hand, critics have argued that EMI implementation depicts the hegemony of the language and that students in EMI schools lack proficiency in English (Nyoni, Ahmed, Philogene and Khaing, 2023). UNESCO (2006; cited in Opare-Kumi, 2024) favours the use of the Ariei language in learning for a minimum of six years in multilingual communities. Kamwangamalu (2013) asserts that EMI policy in Africa has not succeeded in achieving its objectives of promoting literacy and providing opportunities for Africans to take part in the political, economic and social growth of their continent. African scholars have always written on the hegemony of English language in the educational system of their countries, and there is a tradition of advocating for the use of indigenous languages (Charamba and Mutasa, 2014; Awonusi, 2008 and Akujobi, 2019). Opare-Kumi (2024), who studied the effects of EMI on the schooling of primary pupils in Ethiopia, for example, concluded that pupils may benefit positively from mother tongue instruction. Uys, Van der Walt, Van den Berg and Botha (2007) conducted a study on EMI to determine if subject content teachers actually teach language skills in South African classrooms, and relatedly if this could be the reason for the low academic achievement of learners, but concluded that the majority of the teachers did not teach these skills effectively.

Purpose

While Mokibelo, Akinkurolere and Mhindu (2024) examined implementation challenges of language education policies in Botswana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, its focus was on indigenous languages at the primary school level. Although research shows that scholars have written extensively on language policies in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, no broader comparison of the two countries has been undertaken until the current study (Kadenge and Nkomo, 2011; Nhongo, 2020; Umunnakwe, 2017; Oyedokun, 2024). This research aims to have a broader perspective, as we seek to determine the effects of the language policies of Nigeria and Zimbabwe on equity, access to quality education and inclusion. Arising from the context outlined above, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main features of language-in-education policies and their implementation challenges in Nigeria and Zimbabwe?
2. How has EMI enhanced educational inclusion and what are its prospects in Nigeria and Zimbabwe?
3. What are the drawbacks of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in Nigeria and Zimbabwe?

Methodology

The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses) was used to guide the critical review presented in this paper. A review of existing studies, which spanned a period of more than two decades, was conducted between August 2024 and August 2025 and structured according to several categories determined by the review of the existing literature. The first category included publications that explored the definition of key concepts such as inclusive education, inclusion, educational inclusion, economic inclusion and social inclusion. The second category considered themes on educational language policies and language policies in African countries. The third category explored EMI in the two countries and other sub-Saharan countries known for their multilingual nature. The fourth category concerned the challenges of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction

The definitions of key terms were clarified, and it was observed that while scholars had written extensively on language policies in the two countries, there was no comparative study. The categories used in the critical review entailed a division of the articles into four themes (the themes emerged from the review of the research literature). The first was the definition of concepts such as inclusive education, inclusion, educational inclusion, economic inclusion and social inclusion. The second category was educational language policies and language policies in African countries. The third category was English medium instruction in the two countries and other sub-Saharan countries known for their multilingual nature. The fourth category concerned themes related to the challenges of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction.

The studies were reviewed in light of the search terms and some studies were rejected (less than 10%) based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 2). For the review, books, journal articles, conference proceedings and newsletters were accepted due to their specific characteristics and the audiences they serve, while materials arising from electronic publications, such as webinars and blogs were excluded. Articles published between 2000-2024 were accepted (they were considered as recent publications), while materials published prior to and beyond the period were rejected. In addition, English medium materials on Nigeria and Zimbabwe

were accepted. These criteria led to the inclusion of 80 articles. The abstracts (and in some cases, the full articles were read) and the selection criteria applied.

Search Strategy

The search strategy used in the review was divided into four categories as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: General Search Terms

Category	Search Terms	Remarks
Definition of concepts	Inclusion, inclusive education, social inclusion, educational inclusion and economic education.	It was concluded that social inclusion and economic inclusion were not major components of the study.
Language-in-education policies	Language-in-education policies in non-African countries, language-in-education policies in African countries, language in education policies in Nigeria, Zimbabwe.	Language-in-education policies in non-African countries were seen as irrelevant.
English Medium Instruction	English as a medium of instruction in Anglophone countries, Anglophone African countries, and in Nigeria and Zimbabwe.	English as a medium of instruction in non-African countries not a component of the study.
Indigenous languages as medium of education	Challenges of indigenous languages as medium of instruction in African countries, challenges in Nigeria and Zimbabwe.	Challenges in other African countries not relevant.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication type	Books, conference proceedings, journal articles, and newsletters Policy documents from Nigeria, Zimbabwe and other Low-and-Middle Income (LMIC) countries in Sub-Saharan Africa	Blogs and webinars Policy documents from countries outside of Sub-Saharan Africa
Year and location	Published between 2000-2024 Research on primary schools, colleges and Universities in Sub-Saharan Africa	Published before 2000 Research on schools that are not located in Sub-Saharan Africa
Language	Written in English	Written in a language other than English
Literature range	Publications on language policies, EMI, inclusive education and indigenous languages in Sub-Saharan Africa Well-researched publications with a methodology and research design	Publications that did not cover the topic on a relevant discourse Publications without a methodology and clear research design

Data Analysis

Identification of Studies via databases and manual searches

Research publications were identified based on the subject of discussion at each moment. A thorough search was conducted on a broad topic and then narrowed to a specific context as seen in Figure 1. In all, 80 publications were included. In the detailed analysis, the papers rejected (less than 10%) were not within the scope of the study.

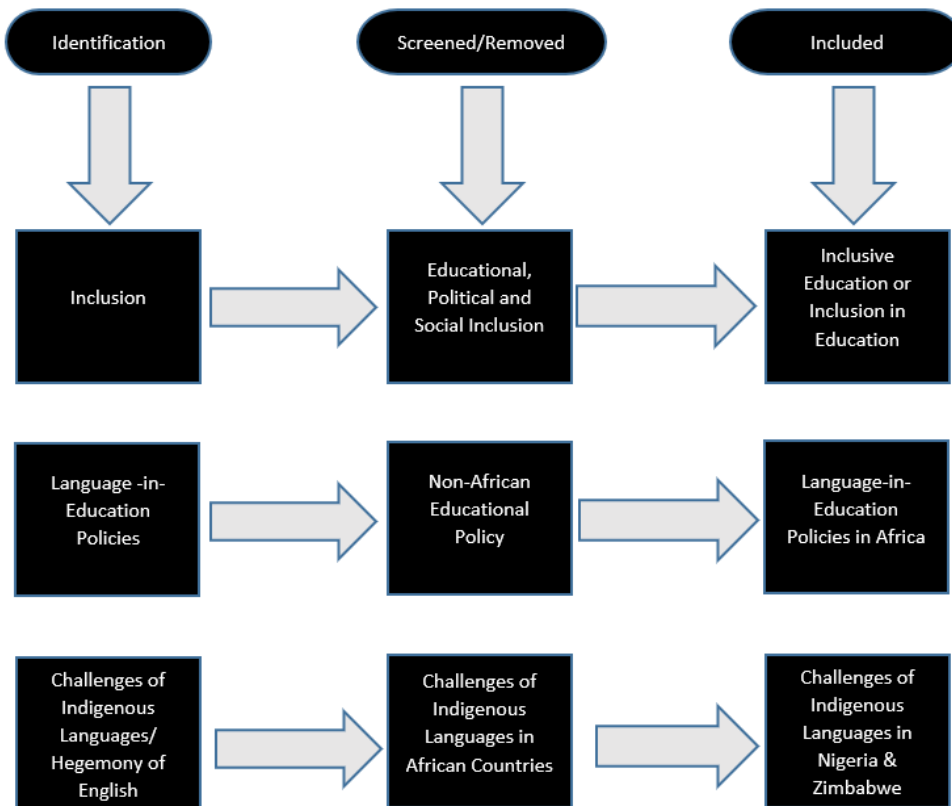


Figure 1: Identification of Studies through Themes
(Adapted from Crompton, Edmett, Ichaporria and Burke, 2024)

Ethics

As part of the research's rigorous design, ethical considerations were an important aspect of the review. Most of the included studies demonstrated ethical awareness, particularly in relation to:

1. **Research Integrity:** the selected empirical studies demonstrated a significant awareness of participants' right to withdraw, as well as care and respect in relation to safeguarding the credibility of the studies.

2. **Trustworthiness, confidentiality and anonymity:** the studies indicated that there was no conflicts of interest and participants were anonymised to protect their anonymity. Participants mainly provided data in their native language thus enhancing the trustworthiness of the studies.

Findings and Discussion

1. What are the main features of language-in-education policies and their implementation challenges in Nigeria and Zimbabwe?

Prior to 2022, Nigeria had no official blueprint for language policy. In 2022, an official compendium outlining the use of languages in various domains of the society was released. Zimbabwe also has no one official document in this area but clauses that address the use of language-in-education policies on primary and secondary education are spread across several documents (Nhongo and Tshotsho, 2020).

Nigeria

The choice of a language-in-education policy is determined by government and educational stakeholders. The colonial era witnessed the transition to English as the language of instruction and a subject of study in schools (Adetugbo 1979; cited in Ogunmodimu, 2015). Since then, Nigeria has had a series of language policies, with the main ones published in 1977 (revised 1981), 2004, 2014 and 2022. The 1977 (revised 1981) language policy states that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at the later stage, English (Section 3.15, 4).

The 2004 language Policy (Section 4, Paragraphs 19e) also endorsed English as the medium of instruction from the fourth year, stating that “The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject from the fourth year.”

The 2014 Policy (Section 2, Paragraphs 20d and f), followed the same trend:

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment in the first three years in monolingual communities. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject: from the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment...

However, in 2022, the Nigerian government introduced the late exit model and English became the language of instruction from secondary school onwards:

To ensure effective delivery of instructions and attendant positive learning outcomes, Mother Tongue (MT) or Language of Immediate Community (LIC) shall be used as the medium of instruction from Early Childhood Care and Development Education to the six years of primary education (4:18, p. 17).

All the policies have been critiqued by scholars (Adeyemi & Ajibade, 2001, Anukaemyi, 2019; Adejisola, 2010; Olugbegi-Adegbite(2022); Owojecho, 2020; and Iwuchukwu, 2021; Bamgbose, 2005; Olagbegju, 2009; cited in Olagbegi-Adegbite 2022). A consistent aspect of this critique has been the current policy's lack of a designated timeframe for implementation.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe was a British Protectorate formerly known as Southern Rhodesia. Research shows that there were four colonial governments in Zimbabwe between 1890-1979: The British South African Company (BSAC) (1890-1922); the White Settler Self-Government (WSSG) (1923-1952); the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (FRN) (1953-1963); and Rhodesian Front Government (RFG) (1965-1979); all the aforementioned governments promoted the use of English as the medium of instruction (Nhongo, 2013; Nkomo, 2008; Thondlana, 2002; cited in Sibanda, 2019). The use of English as a medium of instruction in Zimbabwe was recommended by Hole's Committee in 1908. The country attained independence in 1980 and in 1987, the Education Act was enacted, which states that:

1. The three main languages of Zimbabwe, namely, Shona, Ndebele and English, shall be taught in all primary schools from the first grade as follows:
 - a) Shona and English in all areas where the mother tongue of the majority or the residence is Shona, or
 - b) Ndebele and English in all areas where the mother tongue of the majority or the residence is Ndebele.
2. Prior to the fourth grade, either Shona or Ndebele may be used as the medium of instruction depending upon which language is more commonly spoken and better understood by the pupils.
3. From the fourth grade, English shall be the medium of instruction provided that Shona or Ndebele shall be taught as subjects on an equal time allocation as the English language.
4. In areas where minority language exists, the Minister may authorise the teaching of such languages in primary schools (Government of Zimbabwe, 1987).

The Education Act (1987) has been critiqued by scholars as a continuation of the colonial policy, as English continues to be the main language of instruction, while the indigenous languages are treated as inferior. Other concerns were the preference of parents and stakeholders for English as the EMI, the ineffective implementation of the policy, the non-participation of teachers in the drafting of the policy and the global status of English, which is associated with the need for Zimbabweans to identify with the world market (Nkomo 2008; Chivhanga and Chimhenga, 2013; cited in UNICEF, 2017; Nhongo, 2013, Thondhlana, 2000; Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2010; (Ndlovu, 2008; Mkandla, 2000; (Nhongo, 2013).

The Act was revised in 1990 and 2006 to include the use of some minority languages as a medium of education and students were enabled to learn in the three main languages until secondary class 2 (13 or 14 years); however, the changes were not implemented (Sibanda, 2019).

The 2013 National constitution of Zimbabwe officially recognised 16 languages—ChiNambya, Xhosa, ChiNdau, ChiChewa, ChiBarwe, ChiKalanga, ChiTonga, English, Sotho, Sign language, ChiVhenda/XiVhenda, Koisan/Tshawo, Tswana, ChiShangani (Tsonga), Shona and Ndebele—and equal treatment was declared for all languages. However, three years after the declaration, the pronouncement was yet to be implemented (Mazuruse, 2018). Researchers have found that educational language policy in Zimbabwe has been impacted by a colonial mentality because English remains the dominant language and local languages are still marginalised (Kadenge & Mungari, 2015; Magwa & Mutasa, 2007; Hachipola, 1998; Chimhundu, 1993; cited in Hang'ombe and Mumpande, 2020).

The challenges of implementing the language-in-education policies

Nigeria

Language-in-education policy in any country impacts its political, economic and socio-cultural development. Research shows that in Nigeria, as well as several sub-Saharan African countries, there are inconsistencies in the policies and their implementation (Ogunbiyi, 2008; Trudell, 2018; cited in Obiakor, 2024). Nigeria's first national policy on education was published in 1977, including 1981, 2004, 2014 and the most recent in 2022. Researchers have written extensively on the implementation of the policies; their main views are that the Nigerian government lacks continuity in education policies and this has led to disruption rather than a consistent approach (Eru, Ogi and Ikpe, 2019). Moreover, the rate of the implementation of educational policies in private schools is lower than in public schools (Obiakor, 2024). Akomolafe (2024) pointed out that the Nigerian Educational Research Development Council (NERDC) admitted that the main challenges of

implementing language policies are the dearth of teachers; the lack of instructional resources; and the inconsistencies between teachers' languages and the languages spoken in their communities of primary assignment. Other factors pointed out by Obiakor (2024) are the linguistic landscape of Nigeria, which is heterogeneous in urban areas and would require the recognition of over 500 languages; the term Language of Immediate Community (LIC) is ambiguous though widely used as a framework; and a firm timeline for its implementation has not been established or agreed. Moreover, further research suggests that most teachers in Gusau (Northern Nigeria) are unaware of the policy (Ibrahim and Gwandu, 2016). Tsuare and Sani (2024) also examined some of the concerns related to the New National Language Policy (2022), highlighting the multilingual nature of urban areas in which the languages used by the majority of pupils may be diverse from the language of the teacher.

On the other hand, students may also come from different backgrounds and this raises questions about inclusivity, and most of the indigenous languages that are mediums of instruction are not intellectually developed. The implementation of a policy determines its success; however, it is a consistent finding of research studies, that while policies have been formulated and offer the potential of transformation, they have not been effectively implemented.

Zimbabwe

In relation to Zimbabwe, research shows that one of the challenges of implementing the 1987 Educational Act has been the attitude of parents, teachers and educational stakeholders to indigenous languages. Findings indicate that English is preferred as a medium of instruction at the lower elementary stage. In addition, the global status of English requires knowledge of the language in order to benefit from the global economy and English is considered a symbol of national integration in Zimbabwe. In the same vein, having indigenous languages as a medium of instruction at all levels of education would hinder international employment and the government is not financing the teaching of indigenous languages at the upper level. Again, the government lacks the will or the means to reverse the hegemonic policy. Moreover, teachers were not involved in the development of the policy (Nhongo and Thondhlana (2020), Nhongo, 2013; Muchenje, Goronga, & Bondai, 2013; Ndamba, 2008; Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2010; Mnkandla, 2000; Nhongo, 2013; Mufanechiya & Mufanechiya, 2010; Thondhlana, 2000; Nhongo, 2013; Kadenge & Nkomo, 2011; Nkomo, 2008; Ndhlovu, 2008; Mnkandla, 2000; cited in Sibanda, 2020). Another challenge of implementing language-in-education policy is “the low status accorded to African languages” (Chivhanga and Chimhenga 2013, p. 59). In other words,

some African languages, which are used at the lower elementary level in particular, have not been enabled to develop.

The Need for Inclusion

In both countries, one major critique of the language policies is that they have not been consistently implemented. The policies have also created a dichotomy along the lines of minority and national languages. The national languages of Nigeria and Zimbabwe continue to enjoy prominence, while the features of the policies have not favoured other indigenous languages. One example is the Ndau people in Zimbabwe who have been “excluded from the unified Shona” (Nhongo and Tshotsho, 2020, p.4).

Arising from the above discussion, it is clear that most of the language policies formulated in the two countries have not been implemented and this means that students have been denied the opportunity of learning in their mother tongue. This approach does not encourage inclusion, and consequently, pupils who are not proficient in the language of instruction may become passive learners as they cannot participate fully in class (Makoni and Makoni, 2022). The non-provision of relevant indigenous languages’ study materials by the governments will also deny pupils access to quality education (Ndukwe, 2015; cited in Mokibelo, Akinkulolere and Mhindu, 2024).

2. How has EMI enhanced educational inclusion and what are its prospects in Nigeria and Zimbabwe?

Nigeria

Research shows that scholars have viewed this question from a variety of negative and positive angles; some feel English has enhanced inclusion (Obiakor, 2022 and Njoku, 2017), while others feel it has promoted exclusion (Jegede, Yusuf and Aliyu, 2024). According to UNICEF (2022), 70% Nigerian children lack reading ability and the ability to solve mathematical equations; this is seen as the role of English as the medium of instruction. It has consequently contributed to an increase in the dropout rate (Sa’ad and Usman, 2014). For example, the National Senior Secondary Education Commission (NSSEC) data shows that in the 2023/2024 session, 127,067 students dropped out of senior secondary school (Okeke, 2025). Jegede, Yusuf and Aliyu (2024) opine that the use of English as a medium of instruction in Nigeria has inhibited the comprehension abilities of pupils, and made them passive learners as a result of linguistic barriers.

Njoku (2017) states that English is so pivotal in Nigeria’s educational system, especially as key skills and knowledge are acquired through its use. The language is instrumental to human development in the country (Obiegbu, 2015). In addition, leading cultural figures, authors and actors

have gained global recognition as a result of their mastery of English language in Nigeria (Sanusi, 2024). Other advantages are “better job opportunities, higher family income, higher productivity, access to better health facilities, improved standard of living, ability to participate in the life of the community” (Njoku, 2017, p. 219). English as a medium of instruction has served as a symbol of integration in Nigeria as pupils from diverse ethnic groups have been able to learn the same content and it has provided some degree of national unity (Obiegbo, 2015; Tom-Lawyer, 2011). Consequently, Nigerians, who have mastered the language can easily have access to education (Njoku, 2017).

Its Prospects

English has good prospects in Nigeria as it is widely recognised as the official and educationally preferred language in the country. English is the medium of education in Nigeria from secondary school (NLP, 2022). However, the Nigerian government is yet to implement this policy after three years (Okeke, 2024 and Okoye, 2023). EMI in Nigeria will continue to dominate and be pivotal for a significant period because it is a means by which all curriculum subjects are taught (Anyanwu, 2022) except the teaching of indigenous languages as subjects. It is the official language in Nigeria and a lingua franca. The global status of English also lends credence to its status as an international language. Consequently, it opens doors for better career prospects for students as it is a means of entering higher education. In addition, it is the language of integration and Nigeria enjoys direct investments from English speaking countries as a result of its widespread use (Euromonitor, 2015).

Zimbabwe

According to Khama (2021), who conducted a study on the use of English as a language of instruction and its implications on social justice in primary schools in the Chivi district, English is synonymous with low achievement as a result of teacher and student non-proficiency in the language. The use of English promotes social injustice as it stifles multilingualism, encourages a lack of self-confidence and leads to linguistic displacement and a limited role for indigenous languages.

Its use at the expense of indigenous languages has also resulted in an increased dropout rate, as indicated by Makomborere (2016), whose study revealed that 40,000 students left higher education institutions nationwide. Moreover, 32% of rural school students also dropped out of school countrywide (Tshili, 2016; cited in Ngwenya, 2017)

On the other hand, Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya (2010) examined the use of English as a medium of instruction in Zimbabwean primary

schools and concluded that the hegemony of English remains indelible in the minds of tutors and pupils as it is perceived to be a passport to success and the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Similarly, Marungudzi (2009) investigated the perspectives of secondary school teachers in the Masvingo District on English as a language of learning and teaching and found that they favoured the use of English as a medium of instruction despite the difficulties in its usage.

Viriri and Ndimande-Hiongwa (2023) examined African languages as a medium of assessment in higher education, concluding that it compromised quality supervision. Likewise, Mukorera (2015) explored the influence of Zimbabwean teachers' and learners' attitudes towards English on language use in primary-classrooms. The study revealed that parents, stakeholders, teachers and students favoured the use of English as a medium of instruction, though teachers and students code-switched to navigate difficulties during the schooling process.

Future Prospects

Though English is widely seen as a gateway to success in Zimbabwe, there have been mixed reactions towards its use as a medium of instruction. However, the global relevance of English shows that it has the potential for good prospects in Zimbabwe. Parents and teachers' perceptions of English show that the language is educationally preferred (Gudyanga, Wadesango and Dzirikure, 2015 and Nkwe and Marungudzi, 2015). Moreover, it is the medium of instruction from primary grade four and above and the official language of the country; this shows that it is also fundamental to the educational system of the country.

The Need for Inclusion

Research has also indicated that the use of English as a medium of instruction denies some of the students access to quality education. The low proficiency of teachers and students in the language can result in code-switching during classes (Muhammad, 2017). However, due to the pivotal role of English in the two countries, the language has good prospects (Shizha, 2008).

3. What are the drawbacks of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in Nigeria and Zimbabwe?

The language policies of the two countries provide the basis for the use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction. The Language Policy of Nigeria (2022) states that pupils should learn in their indigenous languages throughout primary school, while the Education Act (1987) of Zimbabwe states that pupils should be taught in their mother tongues during

the first three years of elementary schooling. Mokibelo, Akinkurolere and Mhindu (2024, p. 372) conducted a study reviewing the situation of indigenous languages in language-in-education policies in Botswana, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, and found that “policy inertia, resource limitations, weak parental support, high school drop-out, cultural misfit, and societal attitudes” are some of the challenges of using indigenous languages as medium of instruction. In a related study, rethinking the role of language in education, Fadokun (2023) noted that education based on the mother tongue can potentially enable inclusion and improve the quality of learning.

Nigeria

The main challenges of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction are lack of indigenous teachers, the non-provision of funds by the government for teaching languages, the lack of resources, low-motivation, and ill-preparedness of teachers (Obiego and Eke, 2021). Obiakor (2024), for example, assessed the implementation of the language of instruction policy in Nigeria, and found that the policy which states that pupils be taught in their indigenous languages has a lower rate of implementation in private schools than in public schools; similarly, it has a lower rate of implementation in urban areas than in rural areas. A study conducted by Akinsanya and Tella (2019) revealed that the global status of English, the non-development of Nigerian languages, the lack of specialists in indigenous languages and non-commitment by government are also the main challenges faced by indigenous languages. Jegede, Yusuf and Aliyu (2024) also highlighted challenges such as the dearth of resources and lack of language specialists. Okpala, Alaku and Sule (2023) identified the importance of the global status of English, the lack of specialists in indigenous languages, the fear of the effects of mother-tongue on the knowledge of English, and the lack of resources, teaching aids and textbooks. Ozoemena, Ngwoke and Nwokolo (2021) found that the non-availability of equivalent names for concepts in indigenous languages and the plurilingual landscape of Nigeria were also important challenges that should be considered.

Zimbabwe

The challenges of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction has been explored by researchers extensively in Zimbabwe. For example, a study on the attitudes of student teachers to teaching mathematics using Chishona, showed that students and teachers have a negative attitude to learning mathematics in indigenous languages. In addition, respondents in the study preferred learning English as it hoped it would make them competitive in the global employment market (Chivhanga, and Sylod, 2014). Also, a study conducted by Mufenchiya and Mufenchiya (2010) revealed

that students and teachers were positively inclined towards English as a medium of instruction, as it was considered to be a pathway to upward mobility and the acquisition of skills and knowledge. In the same vein, Marungudzi (2009) asserted that teachers view English positively despite the difficulties associated with its use. They preferred English as a medium of instruction although the government has not aided its use.

In addition, most high income parents prefer to have their children in schools where EMI dominates, a view that is contrary to the language policy (Mlambo 2002 and 2009; cited in Nkomo, 2011). Consequently, the government lacks the political will to enforce its own language policy (Shizha 2012). In this context, endogenous languages are regarded as unscientific, while the exogenous languages are perceived as scientific and having status and social capital (Shizha, 2010). Moreover, the poor attitude of teachers to indigenous languages is also a critical factor inhibiting their use in teaching and learning (Nkwe and Marungudzi, 2015). Another issue of concern is that English is a compulsory subject at the O-Level stage of high school, (Hungwe, 2007; cited in Nkwe and Marungudzi, 2015), this means indigenous languages are given a lower status.

The Need for Inclusion

Children who do not have the indigenous languages recommended as a medium of instruction may suffer marginalisation as a consequence. The non-implementation of the policies can hinder access to quality education. Students may also drop out of school when they become discouraged. Indeed, according to a UNESCO report (2021), approximately 244 million children and youths were out of school globally. Similarly, in 2023, another report indicated that 33% of school children who drop out were from developing countries (UNESCO, 2025). The tribes that tend to suffer marginalisation in Zimbabwe are Tonga, Kalanga, Chewa, Kalanga, Shangani (Mpofu and Salawu, 2018), while in Nigeria, pupils from minority languages are the ones who tend to suffer marginalisation (Worukwo, 2023). Finally, if teachers are positively inclined towards the English language, they typically do not want to implement the language policy as it appears to include no provisions to support students who have low English proficiency.

Conclusion

The review of the research literature in this study has explored the need for educational inclusion in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, using their language policies as a lens through which to explore the main aspects of their language-in-education policies, the challenges of implementing the policies, the consequences of using English and indigenous languages as a medium of instruction and the prospects of English as a medium of instruction. It

concludes by underlining the key evidence identified in the research, namely, that the policies that have denied access to quality education and encouraged the marginalisation of indigenous languages, have harmed students as they have learned in an unfamiliar language and consequently led to increased school dropout rates. Furthermore, they have also promoted inequality, as the policies are not implemented in private schools in the two countries. They are not implemented because successive governments have not enforced them and parents from higher income groups prefer to have their children taught in English from kindergarten.

Moreover, the hegemony of English in most Anglophone countries in Africa cannot be underestimated. Though some scholars view English as promoting exclusion, this study suggests that the language can potentially enhance inclusion, locally and internationally, due to its status. Therefore, English should be used alongside the indigenous languages.

Implications

The implications of the study relate primarily to the argument that language-in-education policies in the two countries should be inclusive. Students are denied access to quality education and this may deprive them of opportunities for upward mobility in their careers, and cause them to drop out of school. If language policies are inclusive, students have the potential to learn better, there will be greater equity in classrooms and lower dropout rates. English as a medium of education is not the sole cause of drop outs in schools; if the policies are properly implemented and pupils are taught in their indigenous languages, they will also have the opportunity to effectively learn English. There will be transfer of skills, when English becomes the medium of education in upper level classes.

The further marginalisation of local languages may result in their extinction and consequently there will be fewer speakers to support their future development. Recognising the importance of local languages and upgrading their status to mediums of instruction is one strategy to develop and preserve them. Furthermore, if this were the case, African children would not risk losing their cultural identity, when their languages become extinct.

Recommendations

Arising from the study, the following recommendations have been identified:

All key stakeholders should engage in grassroots consultations during the formulation of language-in-education policies; specifically, in relation to the implementers of the policy, teachers and practitioners should be involved in the formulation of such policies.

The government should provide a framework for the successful implementation of the policies as well as the resources needed; without the provision of resources, the policies will become ‘paper policies’. The policies should also be enforced and quality education should be funded.

The teachers should be consulted in the formulation of such policies and the government should provide the necessary training and support for its implementation. The issue should be incorporated into in- and pre-service teacher training and continuing professional development.

From the perspectives of researchers, more gaps need to be identified with regard to a comparison of the policies in the two countries, the outcome of the policies should be evaluated, and they should engage with policy stakeholders and practitioners (Tseng 2012).

From the point of view of the policy, there should be an effective implementation of the language-in-education policies and inclusive policies should be formulated. English can be used alongside mother tongues as instructional languages. Adherence to these recommendations has the potential to lead to improvements in the quality of education in both countries and this will in turn contribute to economic, social and political development.

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