



# The Language Question, Development and the Education of the Disadvantaged through Open and Distance Learning (ODL): A Case of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the language question and the education of the disadvantaged through open and distance learning at tertiary level. It seeks to explore some of the difficulties associated with the teaching and learning of the disadvantaged through open and distance learning as a result of the Zimbabwean educational language policy. The paper is a qualitative analysis of data gathered on teaching and learning of some of the disadvantaged students through open and distance learning in the Zimbabwe Open University. Observation and unstructured interviews were used to establish the conditions experienced by these students in their endeavor to comprehend their modules as well as express themselves in tutorials, assignments and examinations. The paper expresses the situation and moves on to demonstrate the unavailability of anything sacred in the use of English as the sole medium of instruction in open and distance learning. It is suggesting the implementation of a more favourable language policy in open and distance learning since the mission of the Zimbabwe Open University as an open and distance learning institution is to ensure education for all. The paper is suggesting the need to use local languages as the languages of instruction, for instance, the two national languages (Shona and Ndebele).

**Keywords:** Language question, Second language acquisition, Open and distance learning, English language, Shona, Ndebele, Disadvantaged groups.

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## 1. Introduction

Open universities are not only seen as the most appropriate vehicle to capacitate the disadvantaged and poor communities of Africa, but also the surest way to mobilise the African masses for the elusive socio-economic development. Since the advent of independence, a plethora of universities offering research degrees in public administration, governance and socio-economic development, have opened their doors but the destination is still very far. Africa boasts of a fair share of professors, but still Africa is moving backward in terms of socio-economic development. Where is the missing link? Will open universities succeed where conventional universities have failed just because they claim to have opened their doors to the remote grassroots communities? This paper locates the problem in the media of communication. We are not 'going community' when we 'shout' at the community, rather than engaging them in a communication process that gives them open space for meaningful contribution. Using the Zimbabwe Open University as a case study, the paper argues that the solution is in mobilising and developing indigenous languages so that we start communicating with the communities rather than 'shouting' at them.

## 2. Definition of Key Terms

Here are the working definitions for some of the key terms:

- **Language question** – a question about which language or language variety is to be used at whatever level in a community or institution.
- **Second language learning** – the process in which people who have already acquired their first language are taught another language usually at school.
- **Open and distance learning** – a process through which people of varying ages enroll and learn at an institution whilst they are at a distance. In other words, most of the times the students would be learning whilst they are at their homes.

- **Disadvantaged groups** – groups of people whose academic backgrounds have been negatively impacted on by factors beyond their control. In the end they may have difficulties with some of the skills such as fluency in a second language.

### **3. Background**

Open and distance learning in Zimbabwe at tertiary level is the core business of the Zimbabwe Open University. It is the only institution offering degrees through the open and distance learning system in the country. The Zimbabwe Open University started in 1993, that is, way after the attainment of independence in 1980. The programmes and courses were designed and developed by the Zimbabweans themselves for consumption mainly by fellow Zimbabweans. Of course here and there foreigners enroll but in most cases the student population comprises of only Zimbabweans. The institution has adopted a language policy calling for the sole use of English as the language of instruction. Crawford, as cited on (Crawford), defines a language policy as what a government or institution does to determine how languages are used within the country or institution. According to Shohamy (2006), although nations and institutions historically have used language policies most often to promote one official language at the expense of others, many countries now have policies designed to protect and promote regional and ethnic languages whose viability is threatened. This has the major advantage of promoting languages that carry the cultures and traditions of those people. By so doing their traditional wisdoms are maintained and their continuous manipulation for the betterment of the nation is ensured. In the Zimbabwean context, the English language was introduced into the country by the former colonial power, Britain, in 1890 for the service of the white man's goals in the country. These goals ranged from political, economic up to religious. With the withdrawal of the white man's rule in the country 90 years down the line, unfortunately his language policy remained very intact. Even programmes like open and distance learning devised by Zimbabweans for themselves during their own era found English playing the centre stage. This flavour unfortunately made the programmes and courses unfriendly to the local learner.

The Zimbabwe Open University offers tertiary education to students from different backgrounds. These include the poor and the rich. There is usually enrolment of many students whose educational backgrounds are not so smooth. These have been disadvantaged in different ways. They include students who attained their ordinary level qualifications as adult learners through correspondence, which is another form of open and distance learning. In the Zimbabwean situation, this happened as a result of varying factors. Some of the people had left the country to participate in the Zimbabwean war of liberation. They left their studies at varying levels, some of whom did so at very low levels. Others had their primary and secondary studies greatly interrupted due to the unavailability of funds for the payment of fees. As a consequence, they failed their ordinary level leading to corresponding years down the line.

Researchers have demonstrated that one area that does not require such interruptions is the second language learning process. Both the input hypothesis (emphasising importance of knowledge injected into the language learner) and output hypothesis (emphasising vitality of practising to speak the language being learned) of language acquisition support this position (Ellis, 2005; Cook, 2008; Gass and Selinker, 2008). Monitoring is another important concept in some theoretical models of learner use of second language knowledge. According to Krashen (1982), the monitor is an important component of a second language learner's language processing device that uses knowledge gained from language learning to observe and regulate the learner's own second language production, checking for accuracy and adjusting language production when necessary. Chomskyan linguists (Chomsky, 2001) have since demonstrated that the process of second language learning can best take place in years before puberty. This is when the blue print or language acquisition device in the human mind that is geared towards language acquisition would best be prepared to adopt a new language. Failure to learn during this period would have considerable negative impact on the overall fluency of the person in the second language.

In Zimbabwe, English is learned as a second language. The majority start learning it at school as they will be acquiring their primary level education. Unfortunately, due to varying factors such as the unavailability of fees as well as the abandonment of learning at some early stages to participate in the war of liberation, the second language acquisition process did not take place so smoothly in some people. As a result their fluency in English was greatly affected. Those people now want to further their education through open and distance learning. It is upon this kind of background that the research was carried out to find out some of the difficulties they are facing as well as suggest ways for combating such problems.

### **4. Statement of the Problem**

Zimbabwe Open University's mission as an open and distance learning institution is, among other things, to take education and empower everybody. However, amongst the target population, there are some who were disadvantaged to the extent that their learning of English as a second language did not take place so smoothly. This appears to be making their learning process difficult and in some cases unbearable since the institution has made English the sole language of instruction. The paper ventures into investigating the nature of the challenges being faced and suggesting possible alternative language policies that may enhance the institution's race towards its mission of empowering all through open and distance learning.

### **5. Research Objectives**

Some of the leading objectives for this paper are to:

- Find out the nature of the difficulties encountered by disadvantaged learners due to the Zimbabwean language policy.
- Investigate the difficulties experienced in tutoring the students.
- Find out the short-term and long-term effects of the situation.

- Find out possible alternative language policies for the institution.

## **6. Research Methodology**

This is a qualitative study where data was gathered through observations and unstructured interviews on the teaching and learning of disadvantaged students in the Zimbabwe Open University. These are students who have had their second language learning process disturbed in one way or the other. Whilst the population included all the Zimbabwe Open University students and lecturers, the sample saw lecturers and students in Masvingo as well as Harare Chitungwiza regions being observed and interviewed by the researcher himself. The students were assured before interviews that their identities would remain anonymous as there would not be any names tagged on to it. The information was recorded in a notebook and analysed qualitatively.

## **7. Findings**

There are disadvantaged students with varying backgrounds in the Zimbabwe Open University. The first group have left conventional education at a very tender age (such as grade 3) to take part in the Zimbabwean war of liberation. Some got married to fellow fighters and stayed there with their husbands who got employment there immediately after independence. Some of them even had some of their children during their stay there. They returned recently and attained ordinary level passes through correspondence, another form of open and distance learning. They then decided to start their tertiary education with Zimbabwe Open University. There are some whose primary education was interrupted by the unavailability of fees. Learning proved to be not viable and they ended up dropping out of school. These corresponded way after and attained their required subjects for the Zimbabwe Open University education. There are other students who completed their ordinary level long back without passes in English and other subjects only to attain them recently through correspondence. They have decided again to proceed to tertiary education with the Zimbabwe Open University. These groups of people have been enrolled into various Zimbabwe Open University programmes.

It has come out that these students have difficulties with English as the institution's medium of instruction. Some of them are not even doing English language as a course but they are facing difficulties in their learning process due to lack of fluency in the English language as explained below:

### **7.1. Problems Encountered By the Tutors and Students in the Education Process**

Most of the affected students attend but would not participate in the tutorials. They usually hold on to their questions and problems up until the tutorials are over. They are shy to air out their concerns during tutorial times because of the difficulties they have when it comes to expressing themselves in the language of instruction, English. After almost every normal tutorial session, they would ask their colleagues and tutors for assistance. They are more comfortable expressing the depth of their misunderstandings during such times as they would be making use of their first languages. It is after such exercises that they would demonstrate some understanding of the concepts. If they are asked questions by tutors or colleagues during tutorial time they would also resort to their first language. Some of the students indicated that they feel so uncomfortable when they attend the tutorial sessions as the tutors and colleagues are free to ask them questions to assess their degree of understanding the subjects of the discussions. Others went further and indicated that now that the Zimbabwe Open University products are scattered all over, it is better to avoid frustration associated with a normal tutorial session through avoiding attending tutorials and sorting private tutorials where they stay.

It has also come out that these students have difficulties with the comprehension of the concepts in their modules. The majority of them are generally mature people who are quite focused and spending most of their time with their books. However, they have the sole obstacle, that is, the medium through which concepts are being expressed in their modules. They often visit coordinators for clarification of most of the critical concepts, in each case making sure that they are explained in the national language, Shona. Following their request, one of the tutors in Harare ended up even conducting some English extra lessons. This meant an extra load of work on the part of the tutor.

The students suffer a lot in carrying out their studies as they have to commit most of their time to their books, as indicated earlier. They need clarification for almost every critical aspect in their module and they need it in the national language. Unfortunately some of the lecturers cannot be easily accessed for the extra lessons. Another lecturer in Masvingo indicated that he often find them seeking clarifications from her even for courses that she does not teach. The students could also hardly express themselves in the assignments. A number of the tutors have indicated that there are students whose essays could hardly be understood. They have added that some of the students would knit together a good argument to a certain level but only to have it interrupted by the insertion of one or two contradictory statements at some point. This affects the students' performances in assignments as well as examinations. As a result, some of the students often find themselves in situations whereby they fail all of the four courses they would be doing, especially in the first semester of their first year. Some of them indicated that, after their first semester, they even threatened to pull out of open and distance learning and only proceeded after some encouragements they got from tutors and well-wishers.

There are some second year students who have also demonstrated that a lack of confidence is still rampant in them arguing that if first and second year concepts could be this difficult to understand then there is no hope of passing third and fourth year courses. However, one lecturer has indicated that, though there is evidence of challenges being experienced by such students, the majority of them are so bright if they are judged from the rate at which they adapt to learning in English at this level. He has also indicated some likelihood of some of the many dropouts the institution talks of at the moment being a result of this problem.

## **8. Discussion**

These findings may raise a number of questions such as: 'But why in the first place has the nation chosen such a kind of language policy for institutions including those into open and distance learning?' The Zimbabwe Open University as an institution has a mission to observe no boundary and take tertiary education to empower everybody but the language policy that has been adopted is not conducive for such a mission. Considering the nature of such clients, it becomes so clear that this language policy is too rigid for such a kind of learning process. As a result, it has made the learning process so unfriendly to the student. If more research is carried out, the number of students experiencing this kind of problem and its impact on them may be alarming. As indicated earlier, one of the lecturers' assessments has proved that most of these students are very bright. They could have emerged to be the best in the institution but all this was ruined by their poor mastery of the medium of instruction. This demonstrates that talent in such students is being greatly affected by the institution's language policy. Again this leads to the questions: 'What is sacred about the use of English as the sole medium of instruction in the Zimbabwean educational system? Why are former colonies being continuously derailed by the policies of the former colonizer when they are saying independence came for them to recover from the damage colonialism did to them?'

One can reasonably suspect that some of the failures that are being experienced in different courses, including in conventional institutions, are a result of this language policy in the system. It is beyond debate that education is best when done in one's mother tongue. Learning in a foreign language such as English has made most of the courses unnecessarily difficult for most people. The concepts are usually quite easy but they are being explained in terms that are unfriendly to the learners which make them very difficult to understand. In the Zimbabwean situation, during the colonial era, English was meant to screen people and in so doing it acted as an obstacle that blocked a number of dreams. Failure to pass the language meant unemployability as well as the unavailability of opportunities to progress even to higher educational levels. Evidence from the current research has demonstrated that today it is still performing the same function. This means whilst the people cried for and fought tirelessly for independence believing that it was going to emancipate and empower them, it is evident in the situation prevalent in the current educational system that they are afraid of completely emancipating and empowering their selves through putting in place policies that enable full manipulation of all the potential talents in the country.

To date, the most developed countries have their indigenous languages at the heart of their language policies in every one of their systems. The Japanese, Chinese etc. offer their education in their indigenous languages. Unlike the Zimbabweans, these countries have managed to put their own people first through making their own educational systems so friendly to them. If foreigners are to go there to enroll for different educational programmes, they would find themselves bound to undertake foreign language lessons since the lectures are offered using those countries' indigenous languages as the media of instruction. They have made their educational systems friendly to their own people though in a way unfriendly to the foreigners. They, therefore, make their people primary and foreigners secondary in everything they do. With the Zimbabweans, the opposite is true. They still have the colonial mentality that anything that is typical of the former mother power symbolizes development and marks progress. It appears they are still colonized though the nature of control being imposed on them is now by way of some kind of a remote control. There is need for a revision of their approach towards everything including their education if they are to totally emancipate and empower their selves. This is the only way through which they may be able to tap all talents in the people and make everything they do typical of them. They must stop perceiving the former mother power as their model and approach education, progress and development in their own direction.

Zimbabweans should place their selves at the centre of everything that they do. The paper does not suggest a total shift from the teaching of the international language or the so-called modern languages. That is impossible in this globalised world. However, there has to be teaching of languages as courses that are separate from other courses. They can do other courses in the national languages (Shona and Ndebele) in order to make the system friendlier to the local consumers who own it. The majority of the students usually does all the thinking in their mother tongues and then translates to the medium of instruction. Therefore, for one to succeed in such a system he/she has to be good in the course concepts as well as in the field of translation. This is often rare as translation is a very difficult course on its own right (Ellis, 2005). That way it is beyond doubt that a lot of talents are being lost during the educational process and this can be the reason behind the reduced speed in as far as the process of development is concerned.

Some may think that it is impossible to teach some of the very technical courses in the national languages. However, linguistics has it that no language is superior to the other and no language has vocabulary for every aspect in the world. What all languages rely upon are the different lexical expansion and semantic processes. These include word formation processes such as innovation or coinage (creation of new terms from the scratch), borrowing (adopting terms from other languages and adapting them to suit the processes in the language), clipping (taking of a part of the word and using it to mean the same as the full version), backformation (shortening of terms), blending (taking parts of two words and joining them to mean something that has characteristics of both words) and derivation (addition of affixes that generate new words by making words fit into different syntactic categories) (Cook, 2008). These help all the languages to deal with any kind of lexical deficiency or lexical gaps that may develop over time. To further support the possibility of teaching some of the technical courses using a language like Shona or Ndebele, people should note that even the English language was originally not equipped to deal with such courses. It was aided by the very processes alluded to above. For instance, a lot of words like 'terminus' were borrowed from Latin.

To support the possibility further, there is also the teaching of one of the most technical and scientific linguistic courses, phonetics and phonology, using the Shona language as the medium of instruction at Great Zimbabwe University. The researcher's analysis of the attitude of the learners towards this approach to learning of such technical courses led to the conclusion that nothing is impossible and learning and teaching could be very easy and interesting if done in a language one is more comfortable with. The African Languages Research Institute's project of compiling a number of Shona and Ndebele dictionaries for areas like Mathematics, Science and Literature terms at the University of Zimbabwe also demonstrated that everything can be said in every language. If all these are possible



in the local languages then making them the media of instruction in open and distance level becomes far from being impossible. The position of the paper is that what is lacking but still necessary is a positive attitude and a patriotic mind. If the revision of the current setup is not done by the current generation, the situation may become too natural for the future generations to deal with it.

## **9. Suggestions**

For Zimbabwe Open University as an open and distance learning institution to achieve its mission statement, there is an urgent need for it to lobby for a revision of the nation's language policy. They must replace English as the sole medium of instruction with local languages like Shona and Ndebele. This would make the learning process friendlier to the local learner who must be the system's main target. This would also instill self love and confidence within the people which is in turn the basis for true progress and development. It would make it easier for the learners to link the learned concepts and what they have around them. This is the only ground that can ensure innovativeness amongst the learners. It is the only situation that would bring an end to the caliber of the current technicians and engineers who can only go as far as maintaining and repairing what has been produced by others. If this is not achieved then they would continue imitating other people's brainchildren.

## **10. Conclusion**

The research has demonstrated difficulties being generated by the rigid language policies in Zimbabwe in general and the Zimbabwe Open University in particular especially when it comes to the teaching and learning of the disadvantaged. It has been demonstrated by way of reference to history that there is nothing sacred in the use of the former colonial power's language. The language was just introduced to the country basically for the sole goal of ensuring convenience on the colonizer's part. Nowadays, way after his departure, all it is doing is make the systems such as open and distance education unfriendly to the local consumers which is the very role it played during the colonial era. This is inflicting unnecessary pain on the local learners at the same time resulting in possible losses of talent in the country. It has been suggested that the revision of the language policies will make learning easier and more suitable for the efforts in open and distance learning of taking language to all. What remain necessary but still missing are a positive attitude as well as a patriotic mind. It has been suggested that English should be replaced with the national languages as the step could make education more relevant to the Zimbabwean environment.

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