

Silozi as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) creates a barrier towards pre-primary school learners' development of basic literacy skills in Zambezi region

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Abstract

The intentions of teaching and learning can only be accomplished if teaching is conducted in a language relevant to learners. A foreign language as language of learning and teaching (LoLT) does not impact learning positively, as learners struggle to understand learning content through such a medium. As a result, learners' mental processes cannot advance to new levels of development as learning becomes abstract, thus not meaningful to learners. In junior primary school (JP) therefore, the medium of instruction should be the child's home language and/or the language in which children are most competent, for example, their home languages, and not Silozi as is the case now in Zambezi region. This paper thus explores the extent to which Silozi is a barrier to learners' development of basic literacy skills in pre-primary in Zambezi Region. The study was guided by Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of how children learn. Six schools from three different contexts (urban, peri-urban and rural) were studied. Nine learners were selected from each school making a total of 54 learners. Learner sample was drawn by using stratified random sampling technique and teachers were purposively sampled.

Data were collected through interviews, lesson observation, and the emergent Early Grade Reading Assessment (eEGRA) test. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, with quantitative data analyzed statistically using analysis of variance (ANOVA). The study found that both teachers and learners were not comfortable with Silozi being the medium of instruction in pre-primary, as they both struggled to express themselves in Silozi consequently making it difficult for teachers to assist pre-primary learners (in the selected schools) to develop basic literacy skills through the said language medium. The study recommends that instruction in pre-primary should be conducted in learners' mother tongue as per the policy directive, and that government should consider formalizing different language dialects with existing orthographies for use in schools as media of instruction to make teaching and learning more meaningful for both teachers and learners.

Keywords: *pre-primary, Silozi, barrier, junior primary, medium of instruction, teaching, learning, eEGRA, mother tongue*

Introduction and literature review

Namibia is a diverse country with different language dialects. The different language dialects need nurturing in order to create a strong learning base for children in the junior primary phase in general and pre-primary in particular. According to Namibia Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (1996), instruction in junior primary phase (Pre-primary to Grade 3) should be conducted in the child's mother tongue. Despite this policy directive, instruction in Pre-primary to Grade 3 in Zambezi region is conducted using Silozi; a foreign language dialect (Nzwala, 2018), and a language dialect both teachers and learners grapple with. Due to the multilingual nature of the Namibian society, teachers are exposed to various constraints in establishing learners' basic literacy skills in the pre-primary classroom.

Multilingualism versus unilateral medium of instruction

Children come to school with diverse dialects absorbed from their different environments. Therefore, pre-primary teachers should understand that children enter a classroom with emergent literacies in their own language dialects and it is these language dialects that should be developed further to develop the languages of pre-primary children, which are keys to shaping the acquisition of basic literacy skills (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Namibia Ministry of Education (2015, p. 9), "children start with pre-primary schooling at a stage of acquiring basic literacy skills through their mother tongues and that mother tongue should be used as medium of instruction (MoI) up to Grade 3". Therefore, teaching children in their mother tongues up to Grade 3 helps to

strengthen ties between the home environment and the school environment. The use of either a second or third language is a challenge to pre-primary learners internalizing learning content as they do not have the relevant speech structures of that language. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) and Eun and Lim (2009) argue that any communication between pre-primary teachers and their learners through the use of any semiotic tool becomes possible only if the language the teacher uses to mediate learning is relevant to learners. For the sake of this article, a semiotic tool (a block, beads, and bottle tops, for example) is one a pre-primary teacher can use to teach in order to enable a pre-primary learner to understand and develop basic literacy skills, but only if instruction is conducted in a language related to learners. Prinsloo and Harvey (2016) admit that a child's home language does not only form the child's basis to acquire an additional language but also shapes the abilities for children to easily acquire and internalize skills. In the same vein, Mizza (2014, p. 101) admits that "pedagogical practices should be practised in the child's mother tongue in order to support the child's initial stages of literacy development", and not in the child's second or third language in which the child lacks the speech structures which help him to think and learn (Njoroge, 2017). In the same context, Mashiya (2011) argues that:

The language children know best (their mother tongues) when they first enter school (in pre-primary) is recommended as the language of learning and teaching and that for a child to communicate and become a fully functional being, the primary language of children should be well developed not only in a home context but should continue to the end of the foundation phase (p. 21).

This is significant for the survival of the target language. According to Namibia Ministry of Basic Education, Sports and Culture (2003, p. 2), "a language is able to survive only if its mother-tongue speakers communicate in their mother tongue". The Namibian pre-primary curriculum further states that language is important to learning and that learning in mother tongue is essential to how children learn basic literacy skills in pre-primary because they "develop a better understanding of what they learn in their own mother tongue" (Namibia Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 9),

and can easily respond to instructions. "When the language used for instruction is not understood, pupils do not have the opportunity to learn, and are therefore neither able to understand the content nor interact with it by participating in class" (Mizza, 2014, p. 101). In other words, learners find it difficult to draw on old knowledge, the basis of new knowledge, due to difficulties in establishing what is being taught. It is thus claimed that instruction conducted in a language not spoken by learners is "submersion because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them to swim" (Benson, 2004, p. 2).

Therefore, mother-tongue based multilingual education is critical as it promotes quality education by removing language barriers, promoting learner inclusion through active engagement in lessons, as well as promoting learners' understanding of learning content (Bang, 2015; Mashiya, 2011; Nzwala, 2007; Namibia Ministry of Education, 2015). The *Pilot Curriculum Guide for Formal Basic Education (PCGfFBE)* in Namibia directs that "in schools with learners with different mother tongues, every effort must be made to give teaching in mother-tongue medium and where there are enough learners, classes each with their own mother-tongue medium can be organized" (Ministry of Basic Education and Culture, 1996, p. 22). Webb (cited in Njoroge, 2017, p. 134) claims that "using language that is not the learners' home language should be discouraged as it coerces educators to use teacher centred methods of instruction characterized by chorus teaching and memorization" which does not benefit learners.

It should however be noted that there are other pressing challenges a multilingual pre-primary classroom is associated with, and one of the biggest challenges resides in dialects which present various challenges for the teacher whose mother tongue is not a version of Silozi, the LoLT. Winkler (2000, p. 79) detected that many teachers teach learners in a language that is "different from their home languages, thus are not sure how to explain the work well because they struggle with the language". This clearly shows that not all Zambezi residents are subjects of the Silozi dialect and that its adoption as LoLT may have far reaching consequences for learners' development of basic literacy skills in the pre-primary grade.

According to Kangumu (2011), Silozi is

only used by 21% of the total population in Zambezi region with only 0.40% household speakers of the said language (Kavhura, 2018). Despite this, and learners speaking different language dialects, schools still teach through Silozi, a second language and in some cases a third language. A United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) study also reports that “vast numbers of non-Silozi learners are being placed in Silozi medium of instruction classes and are thus not being catered for in terms of learning in their home languages” (Ninnes, 2011, p. 19). There is therefore conclusive research evidence that teaching children in their mother tongue prompts and stimulates their literacy awareness as they learn and develop more vocabulary with the support of their teacher (Dorn, 1996).

Coping and intervention strategies

Research suggests that, to recognize and celebrate diversity in a multilingual pre-primary classroom, multilingual reading materials should be availed for use by teachers (Admin, 2014). For example, labelling materials in languages used by learners from various communities in the classroom, and telling stories using different languages of the learners. Mashiya (2011, p. 22) sees stories as “a way of teaching and developing learners’ basic literacy skills (like listening and speaking) in the foundation phase, and should be done in a language a child knows”. Using multilingual reading materials is crucial as it does not only sharpen learners’ understanding, but also teaches learners to “respect and understand other peoples’ cultures and languages” (Admin, 2014, p. 2). According to Admin (2014, p. 3), teachers could still use other coping strategies such as “asking other learners (though challenging) to interpret for their peers; employing choral chanting, singing rhymes and songs (in different mother tongues) in an effort to accommodate different language dialects when teaching; as well as creating own multilingual learning materials thus translating them into the required languages”.

The problem statement

Namibia’s language policy for schools directs that mother tongue shall be used as medium of instruction in junior primary, pre-primary included (Ministry of Education, 2015). This is because mother tongue is the learners’ faculty of learning strength which facilitates pre-primary learners’ acquisition of basic literacy

skills (Mashiya, 2011). Instead of implementing the policy as directed, Education Authorities (EAs) do so, on the contrary by using Silozi as LoLT and abandoning learners’ home languages. Statistics presented to the researcher (as previously alluded to) show that only 21% of the entire Zambezi region population uses Silozi with only 0.40% household speakers of the said language (Kangumu, 2011; Kavhura, 2018). The issue of Silozi is not only a concern at pre-primary level of junior primary phase as its offshoots extend into tertiary institutions where Silozi is offered as a module. Recent statistics show that out of a class of 74 students who sat for an examination in Silozi Language Education 3 (LSP 3700) in Bachelor of Education (Pre & Lower Primary) (Honours) at the University of Namibia (UNAM), Katima Mulilo Campus (KMC) in 2019, only 32 students (representing 43.24%) passed, and 42 students (representing 56.76%) failed (UNAM Silozi Mark sheet, 2019). These statistics paint a bleak and negative picture on the use of Silozi as medium of instruction in pre-primary in Zambezi region and [that] if there is no push for a paradigm shift, in terms of the LoTL, to close such policy implementation gaps and concerns, acquisition of basic literacy skills at pre-primary level in Zambezi region shall always remain a rhetoric and an unrealized dream.

Theoretical framework

This study was guided by Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT) of how children learn. Vygotsky (1978) believes that teachers should use learners’ experiences, embedded in their cultures, of which language is a component, as the basis for teaching, claiming that learners’ experiences facilitate both in depth understanding and internalization of learning contents. Vygotsky (1986, p. 188) further claims that “the ‘social’ is, by implication, the lowest threshold at which teaching in any subject starts to take place and demonstrates a certain minimal ripeness of functions, the basis of the upper threshold, which suggests that instruction (Obuchenie) must be oriented toward the future”. This implies that children acquire basic literacy skills with the support of their social and cultural contexts embedded in their mother tongues (Dorn, 1996). Therefore, the learner’s social context, which informs the learner’s prior knowledge, expressed in their local language dialects, positively or negatively influences the processes involved in learners’

quest for basic literacy skills in a pre-primary class (Thompson, 2013). The development of basic literacy skills by pre-primary learners, possible only through teacher's scaffolding, helps to shift learners' zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), thus preparing them to learn formally in Grade 1 the following year.

Scaffolding in the zone of proximal development

Verenikina (2008, p. 168) understands scaffolding as an "umbrella metaphor to describe the way teachers or peers supply learners with the tools they need in order to learn". Therefore, the use of learners' experiences, expressed best in their mother tongue, as per the SCT suggests that the teacher will introduce collaborative and interactive learning in class through which learners take time and effort to share their experiences; thus unpacking their societal and experiential knowledge to enrich their learning (of basic literacy skills) and pedagogy.

While the concept of scaffolding is not Vygotsky's invention, it was introduced by Jerome Bruner in 1976 with the purpose to analyse adult-child interactions. Bruner uses scaffolding as an analogy for a "mother's verbal assistance in maintaining conversation with and indirectly promoting language learning" (Sabet, Tahriri, & Pasand, 2013, p. 1894). This directly speaks to a child's culture, a tool that helps a learner to make sense of the learning material when teaching is conducted through the child's mother tongue as medium to "operationalise the concept of teaching in the zone of proximal development" (Verenikina, 2008, p. 163; Turuk, 2008, p. 251). This implies that if a teacher scaffolds a pre-primary learner in their mother tongue, the attainment of a new basic literacy skill will be easily realized enabling learners to advance to the next level of competence; to enable the child to achieve goals so that s/he is able to work independently on the acquired skill.

Research questions

The key focus of this article was *How Silozi as a language of teaching and learning creates a barrier towards pre-primary learners' development of basic literacy skills in Zambezi Region*. This key focus was explored through the following research questions:

1. What barriers do Silozi creates on pre-primary learners' development of basic literacy skills in Zambezi region?
2. What are the reasons for such barriers?
3. How can such barriers be mitigated or avoided?

Methodology

The researcher used a variety of methods to explore the research questions of this article, and to establish how Silozi, the LoLT prevents pre-primary learners' from acquiring basic literacy skills in Zambezi region of Namibia.

Research design

The study used a mixed methods approach, and was a case study. A mixed methods case study approach was used for in-depth exploration of how Silozi as the LoLT creates a barrier for pre-primary learners from acquiring basic literacy skills at the schools that participated in this study. Furthermore, to show how different data sets complemented each other so as to strengthen the context of analysis. In this article, qualitative data were generated from interviews and lesson observation data while quantitative data were generated from the eEGRA test data.

Sampling

The sample of this study consisted of six schools, twelve teachers with two teachers from each school (that is one pre-primary and One Grade One teacher from each school), and 54 learners (9 learners per school). The six schools were drawn from three different contexts. For example: two from urban, two from peri-urban, and two from rural contexts respectively. Drawing of schools from three different contexts was necessary in order to establish how Silozi (as a medium of instruction) influenced pre-primary learners' acquisition of basic literacy skills in different socio-economic and cultural contexts.

A sample of learners was drawn using stratified random sampling technique and that of teachers was done purposively. While stratified random sampling draws participants from different levels of achievement, purposive sampling draws a sample on the basis of their potential to partake in the investigation (Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

Data analysis

Data analysis took various forms. For example, qualitative data (interviews data and lesson observation data) were analysed by narrating

the findings from research participants to establish themes. Quantitative data of the eEGRA test data on the other hand were analysed statistically using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test with a significance level of 0.05 as learners and schools performance benchmark. The significance level of 0.05 was treated in relation to the probability value (P. value) to enable the researcher to either reject or accept the null hypothesis (H_0). In other words, the P. value and significance level of 0.05 were keys in determining the rejection and support of the set hypothesis. For example, if the generated P. value is less than ($p < .05$) the significance level of 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected and vice-versa.

Findings

The findings of this study established the extent to which Silozi decelerated pre-primary learners' ability to acquire basic literacy skills at selected pre-primary schools in Zambezi region when used as LoLT. A language that does not align with and address learners' social, cultural and historical backgrounds does not in any way assist learners to understand and internalize learning content as it does not promote a shift in learners' mental processes. In this section, pseudonyms¹ of pre-primary teachers are used when narrating the findings. For example, UST¹ for Urban School Teacher 1; UST² for Urban School Teacher 2; PuST¹ for Peri Urban School Teacher 1; PuST² for Peri Urban School Teacher 2; RST¹ for Rural School Teacher 1, and RST² for Rural School Teacher 2 respectively.

Findings from qualitative data

Interview data

Interviews with pre-primary school teachers on how Silozi constituted a learning barrier to pre-primary learners' acquisition of basic literacy skills had various revelations. For example, "they forget easily" (UST¹), "especially this term, they don't listen to the teacher when the teacher talks" (PuST²), "is like some learners, is like they lack motivation" (PuST²), "I noticed that most of the learners can participate in every lesson, but some they can't. When you approach that learner, a learner can't speak, only that she can cry or keep quiet" (RST¹), "sometimes some learners have problems of not talking" (RST²). These responses are 'motivation' related in outlook and suggest that effective teaching and learning can only be fully realised if learners

are motivated and meaningfully engaged during lessons where they are also given the opportunity to share their own experiences as a way to facilitate in depth understanding of learning content (Vygotsky, 1978).

Interview data on potential challenges pre-primary teachers faced when developing the literacy skills of children for Grade 1 showed that the LoTL still remained a challenge. For example, "some learners are shy and don't want to talk" (PuST¹), "I am facing a lot of problems because other learners they don't want to follow instructions" (RST¹). RST¹'s expression of some learners' inability to follow instructions suggests that they are not conversant with Silozi, the LoLT, thus being not able to do as instructed.

Lesson observation data (LOD)

Lesson observation data revealed that pre-primary learners found it difficult to learn when Silozi was used as medium of instruction, more especially when they were asked to carry out instructions. This implies that when the teacher asked a question and wanted learners to give answers, the learners simply kept quiet, and those that answered expressed answers in their own indigenous languages, not minding whether or not the switch to their indigenous language dialects would not be considered. For example, PuST¹ wanted to see if learners could respond to instructions and in the correct manner, and said the following to them: *Ya ka ni supeza silama sa ziba fa siswaniso fa kimañi?* (Who will show me any body part they know on this picture?) – Then one learner pointed at 'milili' (Hair) as a body part. In another example and in a different context, UST² also wanted to know whether her learners were able to recognise different body parts on the picture and had the following to say: *Ni supeze mautu fa mubili wa Lumba* (Show me Lumba's feet) – Then one learner came forth to show the class Lumba's feet and said 'Kia' (here they are) but pointing at the hands. Their inability to correctly carry out such instructions might have been that they did not understand instructions conveyed to them in Silozi as they did not have concepts for body parts in any language dialect other than in their home languages. It is in this context that Njoroge (2017) admits that a foreign language disrupts learning if used as medium of instruction as learners do not have the relevant speech structures of that language to facilitate learning.

Findings from quantitative data

Quantitative data was derived from the eEGRA test on passage reading. The assessor read the passage in Silozi to learners after which learners orally answered questions based on the passage out of 5 marks. This was done *first* to establish the extent to which learners developed basic literacy skills (listening skills in this case) in pre-primary for demonstration thereof at the beginning of Grade One. *Second*, it was also done to establish whether or not Silozi as medium of instruction prevented pre-

primary learners from developing basic literacy skills at that level of schooling. Pseudonyms² of the schools that participated in the study were used as in Table 1 below. For example: US¹ for Urban School 1; US² for Urban School 2; PuS¹ for Peri urban School 1; PuS² for Peri urban School 2; RS¹ for Rural School 1 and RS² for Rural School 2. Table 1 also compares learners' output across the six schools thereby providing an overview of which learner and school performed better than others on the question and why.

Table 1: Schools and learners' performances on the question

Schools						
Learners	US ¹	US ²	PuS ¹	PuS ²	RS ¹	RS ²
1	80	60	60	40	60	100
2	80	60	60	40	100	100
3	80	80	20	40	100	100
4	80	60	60	60	100	100
5	80	60	80	60	80	100
6	40	60	0	80	100	100
7	60	80	80	40	100	100
8	60	80	100	20	100	60
9	80	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	71.1	71.1	62.2	53.3	93.3	95.6

Table 1 reveals some huge inconsistencies in the performance of learners on the activity which could be attributed to both poor teaching strategies of some teachers as well as using Silozi as the LoLT. This is evident with Learner 6 of PuS¹ scoring 0% (zero) on the activity; Learners 3 and 8 (from PuS¹ & PuS²) with only 20% each; and Learners 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 from US¹, and PuS², with 40% each respectively. Therefore to compare the mean scores of various schools on the activity and to determine whether using Silozi (as medium of instruction) decelerates pre-primary learners' development of basic literacy skills, the researcher formulated statistical null hypothesis (H₀) as shown below:

- **H₀**: There is no significant difference in learners' abilities to acquire basic literacy skills if Silozi is used as medium of instruction in pre-primary
- **H₁**: There is a significant difference in learners' abilities to acquire basic literacy skills if Silozi is used as medium of instruction in pre-primary

Statistics presented in Table 1 show that PuS² performed poorly with a mean value of only

53.3% and RS² was the best performing school with a mean value of 95.6%. The mean value of 95.6% for RS² could be characterized by the excellent performance of Learners 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9 with a 100% score each. On the other hand, the low mean value of PuS² could be ascribed to some learners performing poorly in the activity (e.g. Learners 1=40%; 2=40%; 3=40%; 7=40% & 8=20% respectively). Furthermore, RS²'s high mean value (of 95.6%) could still be attributed to learners' exposure to Silozi in their communities, and PuS²'s low mean value (of 53.3%) could be ascribed to pre-primary learners' not understanding Silozi as medium of instruction, thus not comprehending the activity. Therefore the mean scores obtained by different schools ranging from 53.3% to 95.6%, and pre-primary learners' marks stretching from 0% to 100% demonstrate that the difference is significant (ANOVA One-way, df_{5, 48}, p=0.00021) meaning that p<.05 (See Appendix 1). Since P-value (=0.00021) is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis (H₀) and thus conclude that there is a significant difference in learners' abilities to acquire basic literacy skills if Silozi is used as medium of instruction in pre-primary (H₁).

This conclusion implied that in their pre-primary year, learners did not develop listening comprehension skill as their medium of instruction was Silozi and not their mother tongues. According to Mashiya (2011, p. 11), stories serve as “a way of teaching literacy in the foundation phase, where learners are trained to listen and speak, and should thus be done in a language a child knows”. The use of either a second or a third language inhibits development of learners’ basic literacy skills as such language dialects are not the learners’ mother tongues and learners do not have the relevant speech structures of the languages (Njoroge, 2017). Supporting the use of mother tongue, Dorn’s case study also confirms that mother-tongue instruction gives learners the opportunity to talk. Secondly, learners also develop literacy awareness in the sense that they learn and develop more vocabulary with the support of the teacher (Dorn, 1996).

Conclusion

This paper explored Silozi as LoLT and how it affected pre-primary learners’ acquisition of basic literacy skills in Zambezi region. Based on its findings, the study called for a paradigm shift on the language of instruction in pre-primary in Zambezi region to accelerate and strengthen meaningful learning. This is due to the fact that the current practice does not in any form help learners to benefit from their cultures during teaching and learning.

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APPENDIX 1 [Story reading]

Anova: Single Factor

SUMMARY

Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
US ¹	9	640	71.11111	211.1111
US ²	9	640	71.11111	211.1111
PuS ¹	9	560	62.22222	1144.444
PuS ²	9	480	53.33333	600
RS ¹	9	840	93.33333	200
RS ²	9	860	95.55556	177.7778

ANOVA

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	12777.77778	5	2555.556	6.026201	0.00021	2.408514
Within Groups	20355.55556	48	424.0741			
Total	33133.33333	53				