

Indigenous Languages Endangerment in the Universities: A Focus on the Zimbabwe Open University's (ZOU) Tutors and Students' Perceptions

By

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Abstract

The present study is descriptive survey explored the degree of language endangerment in the universities with particular reference to tutors and students' perceptions at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). It employed a random sample of 40 tutors and 160 students. Tutors were interviewed during the examination processing period in December 2011, while data were gathered during the conduct of tutorials between October and November 2011. Data were interpreted thematically. The study found out that English language was the main cause of indigenous language endangerment in the learning institutions in the country. It also found out that lack of resources and negative tutor and student attitudes could present challenges to the implementation of indigenous languages to the teaching processes at university level. The study concluded that use of indigenous languages in the teaching of university courses is gateway to mastery learning. The study recommends the need to revisit the existing language policy with the intent to rebrand it in order to tailor it to local needs. It also recommends that the government need to train existing and new tutors in the pedagogic and andragogic principles. Studies in the same area need to be carried out at a national scale using state and private universities in order to generate comprehensive knowledge in the area.

1. Introduction

Most universities world over seem to use English language as a medium of instruction. Their language policies seem to be tilted in favour of foreign languages at the expense of the indigenous languages (Peacock, 2001). Most Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions appear to have a very long way to go in regard to their elevation of the indigenous languages to the same level and status with English Language. As a result of this challenge, ODL tutors and learners may be found grappling with efforts to adopt a more sensible approach to the organisation of the learning opportunities among adult learners (Wong, 2010).

The world has about 6 700 languages that people speak. Within a century or so, there will be just about 3 000 languages still spoken (Mufwene, 2002). He goes on to indicate that within two centuries or so, there will be even fewer languages. The number might just drop to couple of hundred.

Indigenous languages are on the verge of extinction. They have fast become endangered species (Ishumi, 1994). As Africans with a cultural heritage and history which all feel proud of we should learn from the Japanese, Finns, Swedes, Norwegians, Germans and Swiss among other foreign developed inhabitants of the world who have reaped immense benefits from indigenising their media of instruction in their education systems. These foreigners seem to have realised the costs of endangering their indigenous languages in all their levels of education, that is, pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary (teacher education and polytechnic and technical colleges) and higher (university) education systems.

Indigenous languages run the risk of disappearing in the near future. In the next fifty years or so there will be no indigenous languages to talk about (Manbiot, 2001). Education systems may have a say in the

endangerment of their countries indigenous languages. It is against of the preceding observations that the present study intends to explore the extent of indigenous languages in the universities with particular reference to the tutors and students' perceptions at the Zimbabwe Open University. It also seeks to point out how indigenous languages are endangered in the university environments. Furthermore, it examines some of the likely benefits of controlling language endangerment in universities among other study's objectives.

Statement of the problem

In a bid to investigate the phenomenon in question, the following question represents the study's statement of the problem as to what extent are indigenous languages endangered in universities?

Research questions

The following research questions tried seek answers for the main research problem.

- How are indigenous languages endangered in the universities?
- How is the control of indigenous languages endangerment beneficial to university education?
- How can the implementation of the indigenous languages as a medium of instruction present challenges to ODL university education?
- What policies can the government and ODL institutions need to put in place in order to promote indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in the education system?

2. Literature Review

This section briefly examines the nature of language endangerment in the universities. Before, the researcher delves into the crux of language endangerment, it is necessary to identify four levels of language endangerment as put forward by Felix (2002).

1. **Vulnerable:** Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).
2. **Definitely endangered:** Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home.
3. **Severely endangered:** Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak to children or among themselves.
4. **Critically endangered:** The youngest speakers are grandparents and elders in the community, and they speak the language partially and infrequently.

According to Ward (2002), the linguistic equivalent of an ecological disaster is looming according to researchers from the University of Manchester who say that 90% of the world's languages are likely to disappear by 2050. They go on to indicate that language cull could leave people speechless.

Most worlds' languages have diminishing numbers of speakers and are on the brink of falling silent (Jones and Ogivile, 2011). For the same authors and scholars of endangered languages, they are beginning to realise that the rapid and often artificial nature of the documentation of the indigenous languages can have negative effects- politically, linguistically and culturally-which feed into issues relating to education and, ultimately, language revitalisation.

Globalisation is exerting its toll on language development because of its speed and extent. Languages that are spoken by very few ethnic communities, perhaps only by 2000 people, or by a couple of hundred will die fast, while languages spoken by big economic powers such as the Japanese are likely to make as are languages spoken by millions of people such as the Chinese and Hindu (Mufwene,2002; Tollefson,1991). In Zimbabwe, English remains the official language at the expense of the indigenous languages (Mapolisa and Chirimuuta, 2012). The purpose of this study was to investigate how regarding English language as the only official language could endanger the indigenous languages in Zimbabwe.

3. Research Methodology

The study is rooted in triangulation methodology in which quantitative and qualitative approaches will cover up for each other's shortcomings (Punch, 2004). According to Cresswell (2005) such methodology is called mixed methods. For Flick (2009), it is known as pragmatism. While quantitative research produces generalisable data, qualitative research is hailed for its strength of theory generation (Silverman, 2006).

Descriptive survey is the present study's chosen research design. It is suitable for this particular study because of its ability to permit researchers to investigate opinions, attitudes, views and perceptions about given phenomena (Leedy, 1997). In this particular case, use of descriptive study will allow the researcher to explore the ZOU's tutors and students perceptions of the language endangerment in the universities.

A sample of forty instead of the intended fifty tutors was interviewed because most tutors who were approached were busy with other equally competing academic duties. They were randomly sampled so as to cater for a fair gender composition of the tutors. Ten tutors of each of the four Faculties of the ZOU were interviewed during the examination processing session of December 2011. Also, 160 out of the intended 150 students responded to the questionnaire containing five broad questions that were drawn from the research questions which were also the same questions which were used to interview tutors. Faculty of Arts and Education provided 90 respondents, Commerce and Law; 20 respondents, while Applied Social Sciences provided 27 respondents. Faculty of Science and Technology had 15 respondents. The research data were presented using tables before describing and interpreting them thematically. Data interpreted from themes often generates new knowledge (Flick, 2009; Silverman, 2006).

4. Discussion of Findings

The discussion of actual findings is preceded by the presentation and description of demographic characteristics of the research participants.

Respondents by gender

Tables 1(a) and 1(b) below show distribution of tutors and students by gender

Table 1(a): Distribution of tutors by gender (N=40)

Variable	Frequency	%Frequency	Total Frequency	Total % Frequency
Tutors				
Male	20	50	20	50
Female	20	50	20	50
Total	40	100	40	100

Table 1(a) shows the distribution of tutors by gender. Fifty percent of them were male and the rest were females. The distribution shows a fair representation of tutors' responses to language endangerment by gender.

Table 1(b): Distribution of students by gender (N=160)

Variable	Frequency	%Frequency	Total Frequency	Total % Frequency
Students				
Male	98	61	98	61
Female	62	39	62	39
Total	160	100	160	100

Table 1(b) shows distribution of students by gender. Most (61%) of the students were male, while 39% of them were female. Results show that more male students attended tutorials during the conduct of the study.

Distribution of Respondents by Faculty

Table 2(a): Distribution of tutors by Faculty (N=40)

Variable	Frequency	%Frequency	Total Frequency	Total % Frequency
Arts and Education	10	25	10	25
Commerce and Law	10	25	10	25
Science and Technology	10	25	10	25
Applied Social Sciences	10	25	10	25
Total	40	100	40	100

The distribution in table 2 (a) shows four Faculties of the ZOU providing 25 percent of the respondents for this study. These findings, albeit a small sample tend to reflect an institutional character regarding the phenomenon under study.

Table 2(b): Distribution of students by Faculty (N=160)

Variable	Frequency	%Frequency	Total Frequency	Total % Frequency
Arts and Education	98	61	98	61
Commerce and Law	20	13	20	13
Science and Technology	15	9	15	9
Applied Social Sciences	27	17	27	17
Total	160	100	160	100

The scenario in table 2(b) shows that the majority (61%) of the respondents belongs to the Faculty of Arts and Education which specialises with the teaching of languages. Seventeen percent of the respondents came from the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. Thirteen percent of the respondents belonged to the Faculty of Commerce and Law, while 9% of them belonged to the Faculty of Science and Technology.

5. Actual Research Findings

The actual research findings are discussed following themes put across in the research questions section. These are:

- Endangerment of indigenous languages in the universities.
- Benefits of controlling indigenous languages endangerment in the universities
- Challenges to the promotion of the implementation of the indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in the universities
- Government and ODL university policies to promote indigenous languages as a medium of instruction

Endangerment of indigenous languages in the universities

Both sets of respondents concurred that indigenous languages are running the risk of getting endangered in the universities. All tutors and all students were in strong agreement with the view that preferred use of English language as an official language and medium of instruction was tantamount to the destruction and murder of indigenous languages. Presently, all ODL programmes have courses, save for Interactive Teaching and Learning of Shona /IsiNdebele, and are tutored in English. Their modules and examinations are also written in English. Some tutors and students concurred that the curricular offered in the universities are the most perfidious and dangerous means of destroying the indigenous languages. To underscore their observation, the following remarks suffice.

- *Indigenous languages such as Shona, IsiNdebele and Zulu are largely learnt in English language.*
- *Politics, Law, Medicine and Agriculture are taught in English language. How then and when will the indigenous languages become the medium of instruction and official language?*

Both sets of respondents shared the same sentiments regarding the conduct of conferences and research supervision. They pointed out that conferences are held in English if ever they are to receive widespread academic acceptance. Research supervision is carried out using English language. To underscore this observation, one tutor and ten students held a similar point of view when they highlighted that research students for indigenous languages are compelled to carry out their studies in English language.

According to respondents it was disheartening to note that tutorial discussions were held in English. The same thing applied to the issue of holding seminars. Tutors and peer students' comments are given and made in English in a bid to demonstrate an unequalled measure of academic prowess and acumen, as if this is impossible when one uses indigenous language-remarked one tutor.

Most respondents felt embarrassed to learn that it was an unpalatable and anomalous behaviour for students to express their ideas in the vernacular. Such a practice was viewed as a characteristic of intellectual redundancy and backwardness. The existing academic system hardly has any room for the implementation of the indigenous languages in the teaching of ODL Programmes.

Benefits of controlling indigenous languages endangerment in the universities

Respondents gave a mouthful benefit associated with the practice of controlling indigenous languages endangerment. Ninety percent of the students and 80% of the tutors revealed that use of indigenous languages to tutor ODL courses motivates them to learn. One student remarked that everything inspires man with some opinions or expressions and man tries to move one step or more in order to reach a higher target, and there is no doubt that the use of indigenous languages in ODL tutorials is one of the available ways to go up the academic ladder.

Indigenous languages help people to value themselves. All respondents were content that indigenous languages would help learners to feel their academic contributions receive the value they deserve. This observation is in tandem with earlier findings by Thomas (2009) found out that indigenous languages provide people with a torch to watch life as liveable because of its aesthetic approach and it inspires people to make creative opinions about their lives. Indigenous languages bloom social developments in parallel. Social dynamics and social hopes shape indigenous languages and conduct artistic approaches (Tsui and Tollefson, 2007).

Respondents viewed ODL as an enjoyable experience. By implication, they regarded it as a fun and exciting experience. Their opinion is consistent with Borg (2009) who pointed out that man always needs fun and indigenous language is an available and relaxing entertainment which shows the effect of relaxing by only learning, watching and seeing. In this case, indigenous language is a vital component of life and an indispensable part of everyday life. If people view indigenous language as their daily need,

they always need to fully need their language approaches too- and that they enrich their lives with indigenous languages.

Instruction is be mastered through indigenous languages. All respondents did not dispute that subject mastery at university level could be further enhanced through the use of indigenous languages. Similar sentiments were echoed by Felix (2002) who argued that indigenous languages are the charming component on earth and they constitute the most effective language to tell everything.

All respondents indicated that use of indigenous languages is associated with lifelong learning in ODL. Their view is taken up by Jensen (2011) who points out that lifelong learning is a process that administers someone with the main knowledge of life and also technical knowledge of life.

Most respondents agreed that use of indigenous languages at university level tends to increase the meritocratic and utilitarian values of adult learners as citizens of their countries. Indigenous languages are an alternative to promote government plans for development or to have a say and stand to have an international showcase (Wong, 2010). The function of indigenous languages is to serve collective opinions and expressions and to serve the well being of society.

Challenges to the promotion of the implementation of the indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in the universities

Respondents also put forward their perceptions regarding challenges that may impede the promotion of the implementation of indigenous language as medium of instruction in the universities. All respondents pointed out that if ever indigenous languages were to become media of instruction availability of material resources become a teething challenge. One student uttered that it will be very expensive for the government and universities to translate and produce printed reading materials into the indigenous languages for all programmes' courses previously written in English.

One other challenge that 98% of the respondents indicated was teacher/lecturer attitude towards the teaching of non-vernacular university courses. Respondents indicated that some theories and models in English could be hard to interpret in the indigenous languages.

Related to teacher/lecturer attitude, all respondents agreed that teachers/lecturers are not trained to deliver instruction using indigenous languages in their areas of expertise. Again this raises cost implications regarding the need to train, induct and staff develop lecturers in the tutoring/lecturing of courses using indigenous languages.

All respondents were content that once all courses were tutored/lectured using indigenous languages, they were going to be viewed as qualitatively inferior by the members of the society. Such negative perceptions are a result a result of the previous negative experiences that were imposed on society by the colonial masters. According to Ishumi (1994) the language of the colonial master was always superior in every respect and aspect of any level of education.

Eighty eight percent of the respondents indicated that modern technology in the form of computers pose a threat to utility of indigenous languages in the teaching of university courses. It is dear to purchase software to present undiluted indigenous languages for the purposes of effective teaching.

Government and ODL university policies to promote indigenous languages as a medium of instruction

Respondents also gave possible policies that the Government and ODL universities as well as other universities may craft in a bid to promote the implementation of indigenous languages in the teaching of university students across all programmes. Fifty percent of the respondents drawn mainly from those with an education or teaching background proposed the need to re-examine the provisions of the 1987 Education Act about the language policy as amended in 1991 and most recently in 2006. The existing

language policy as per contents of the 1987 Education Act stipulates that the medium of instruction from grades 1 to 3 is the vernacular. This means that doors were shut for the use of indigenous languages in the teaching of grade 4 to university students in the majority of the curricular subject/courses that traditionally and predominantly taught in English.

The respondents also proffered the need for offering staff development courses in indigenous languages to university lecturers, ODL tutors and teacher educators. This will make them acquaint themselves with effective teaching of university courses by means of indigenous languages.

6. Summary and Conclusions

In view of the preceding findings, the following findings suffice. In connection with how indigenous languages could be endangered in the universities the study found that use of English language as a medium of instruction, use of English tutorials, supervision of research and presenting conference papers in English and students' shyness to use vernacular in the tutorials topped among the list of dangers to indigenous languages. The study concludes that all things being equal, English language should never override indigenous languages in the teaching of learners at any level of education.

In regard to the likely benefits of controlling the endangerment of indigenous languages, the study found out that indigenous languages motivate tutors to tutor learners to learn; and motivates learners to want to learn. Indigenous languages increase the meritocratic and utilitarian value of students in their countries. It can be concluded that an indigenous language is a sociological concept that covers many social relations, affects and provides society with tools for organising and grasping civilisation. Tutors and students learn to value themselves. It can be concluded that instruction at university level could be mastered through indigenous languages.

With regards to challenges that are likely to be experienced as a result of introducing the implementation of indigenous languages in the teaching of university students, the study found out that material, technological and human resources were expensive to acquire. Also negative student and tutor, and societal attitude and perceptions would shoot down the acceptance, recognition and credibility of the university programmes produced using indigenous languages.

Regarding possible that the government and ODL and conventional universities could craft, the study revealed that the provisions of 1987 Education Act revolving language policy be revisited. It went on to suggest the benefit of preparing tutors and lecturers for effective teaching.

7. Recommendations

In the light of the above results and conclusions, the study makes the ensuing recommendations.

- The government and universities need to revisit the existing language policy with the intent to rebrand it in order to tailor it to local needs.
- The government and the private sector need to join hands and train existing and new tutors in the pedagogic and andragogic principles to enable them become effective indigenous languages instructors in any subject/course.
- Resources need to be provided support the innovation of this magnitude if ever Zimbabweans are to feel proud of their culture, language and values as a people.
- The ZOU needs to establish the Institute of Research and Indigenous Languages as a matter of urgency so as to promote significant and meaningful research output in the studied area.
- Studies in the same area need to be carried out at a national scale using state and private universities in order to generate comprehensive knowledge in the area.

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