

# Challenges Faced by Student Teachers when Teaching Through the Medium of Mother Tongue during School Based Studies: A Case for Katima Mulilo Campus Bachelor of Education 4 (Pre & Lower Primary) Students

**Kenneth Nzwala**

*Pre & Lower Primary Department, Katima Mulilo Campus, University of Namibia,  
knzwala@unam.na*

## ABSTRACT

*This paper reports on a study that investigated challenges faced by Bachelor of Education (Pre and Lower Primary) final year University of Namibia students at Katima Mulilo Campus when they taught through the medium of mother tongue during School Based Studies (SBS). The study is located in the interpretive paradigm and is an intrinsic case study. It is shaped by the school of thought that supports the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in lower primary classrooms. Two students at two different School Based Studies support schools were studied. Data were collected by using interviews and classroom observation. One student teacher taught in Grade 2, and the other one taught in Grade 3. Both were interviewed and their lessons were observed. Interviews and observations were transcribed and translated into English.*

*The results of the study show that Pre and Lower Primary Bachelor of Education final year student teachers faced various challenges with regards to the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction during SBS. The challenges ranged from their inability to express themselves fluently in the target language (Silozi in this case); difficulties in translating concepts from English into Silozi (mother tongue) since the curriculum is in English; writing words; planning lessons in the target language; a lack of materials in line with topics, more especially topics of integration. The study recommends that the Silozi orthography should be made available to all the schools in the region; teachers should receive intensive training on how to teach through the medium of Silozi; lessons that are taught through the medium of Silozi should be planned in Silozi and not in English; there should be Silozi dictionaries to assist teachers with translation. Finally, there should be relevant Silozi teaching and learning materials.*

**Keywords:** *Challenges, Mother Tongue, School Based Studies, Bachelor of Education, Pre and Lower Primary*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

Before Independence in 1990, the medium of instruction in schools in Namibia was either English or Afrikaans, thus disadvantaging the majority of Namibians who neither spoke nor understood these languages. Put briefly, the majority of the indigenous languages spoken by the majority of the Namibian population were marginalized. At Independence in 1990, the Namibian constitution promised equal opportunities for all Namibians as a basic human right, and promoted a multilingual society (UNESCO, 2008). The constitution also recognised the previously marginalised indigenous languages as a means to achieve this. The Ministry of Education and Culture, in collaboration with its stakeholders embarked upon consultations by issuing language policy guideline statements in the documents *Education in Transition*, July, 1990 and *Change in Continuity*, November, 1990. "These statements gave broad directives for language choices as mediums of instruction...establishing the use of English as official language" (Namibia. Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993, p.63). In July, 1991, the Ministry of Education and Culture came up with another document entitled *Provisional Language Policy for Schools*. This was a draft for a *discussion document* and was distributed to all the stakeholders. All these consultations culminated in the formulation of Namibia's language policy for schools. Ministry of Education and Culture (1993, p. 66) acknowledges that "beginning in 1993, the home language, a local language, or English will be the medium of instruction in Grades 1-3, with English as a subject".

### 1.2. Statement of the problem

Namibia's language policy states that in lower primary, teaching and learning shall be conducted in the first language/s of the learners. In most cases, student teachers had a problem with this stipulation, and thus preferred teaching in Grade 4 where instruction is done in English (a second language). Since teaching lower primary learners in their first language/s is a policy issue, and cannot be deviated from and changed, it is an area of great concern and a gap that needs further probing, and causes thereof established and understood.

### 1.3. Research questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

- What challenges did Pre and Lower Primary BED (Honours) final year student teachers face when they taught through the medium of mother tongue during SBS?
- How did they overcome these challenges?



## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. The concept of mother tongue**

Mother tongue is the language a person acquires from birth and can be regarded as the language a child acquires first and in which s/he establishes the first verbal contacts" (Abidogun 2012, p. 22). Conversely, Ministry of Education and Culture (1993, p 93) describes a mother tongue as the "situation that exists in monolingual families where the mother is the main source and inspiration for the child's initial socialization". Additionally, UNESCO (1953, cited in Abidogun, 2012, p. 23) defines the concept "mother tongue" as "the language that a child acquires from birth and which becomes his/her natural tool of linguistic interaction". Put briefly, mother tongue is someone's basic language, the language used for communication in our homes.

### **2.2. Theoretical framework and the role of mother tongue**

This study investigates challenges faced by Pre and Lower Primary student teachers regarding the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction during School Based Studies (SBS). The theoretical framework of this study is influenced by the school of thought that supports the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in lower primary classes. Lawson (1973, cited in Abidogun, 2012, p. 14) points out that language is a

"crucial variable in teaching and learning, and that it is a human quality that stimulates human beings to acquire learning, think positively and adapt to societal norms and traditions". "The language of instruction of teachers and learners must therefore be a familiar language which learners can understand" (Leung, 1998, cited in Abidogun, 2012, p.14). According to Abidogun (2012, p.14), "the chances of learners achieving better results in class due to the use of a familiar medium of communication are higher than when a language unfamiliar to learners is used in class".

Similarly, Herbert (1992, cited in Phiri, Kaguda & Mabhena, 2013, p.47) states that "mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction as it is the most...because it has the learners' experience". The child's mother tongue is the language that a child knows well and which s/he can use to form sentences and express him or herself. "Children learn easily in their mother tongue because they easily identify with it than a foreign language" (Phiri, Kaguda & Mabhena, 2013, p.48). Furthermore, Phiri, Kaguda and Mabhena (2013, p. 48) say that "the mother tongue allows for proper social integration in schools and therefore helps to avoid maladjustment in children". Moreover, research have proven beyond reasonable doubt that children learn best when they are highly proficient in their medium of instruction (Phiri, Kaguda & Mabhena, 2013, p.48). According to Abidogun (2012), learning takes place more easily through the medium of one's mother tongue. "Education in the mother tongue develops the linguistic and cognitive levels of learners, especially between the (sic) six and eight years of primary education (Ball, 2010, cited in Abidogun, 2010, p. 1).

Furthermore, Cummins (2001, cited in Yazici, Ilter & Glover, 2010, p.261) points out that “children learn a second language when they have a good grasp of their mother tongue”. This view links well with Namibia’s language in education policy which states that “the mother tongue should be the medium of instruction throughout the first three years, with a transition to English Second Language starting in the fourth year” (Ministry of Education, 2005, p.5). Additionally, the Ministry of Education (2005, p.5) states that learning should be meaningful and can be “best achieved through the medium of the mother tongue of the learner” because children use their cultural capital, the wealth of knowledge and experience which is rooted in their mother tongue to excel (Robertson, 2005).

### **2.3. Challenges associated with mother tongue as medium of instruction.**

Teachers who implement the curriculum face huge challenges in accessing it (curriculum) in mother tongue because of a short supply of the curriculum in local languages. Instead they are tempted to use the curriculum that is written in the second language, which in our case is English (Ndamba, 2008). In the same vein, Gacheche, (2010, p. 19) indicates that “most education systems that attempt to institute systems that encourage learning through a child’s home language suffer from an acute shortage of teachers who speak and have access to these home languages, yet one of the criteria for effective usage of local languages for instruction is that there must be enough teachers to teach in it”. Teachers who are not native speakers of the child’s home language and who are not trained how to use mother tongue based teaching revert back to old systems of teacher controlled interactions (Gacheche, 2010).

### **2.4. Regional dialects and their impact on the medium of instruction**

The Zambezi region is composed of different groups of people. These groups speak different dialects of Silozi language, for example, Chisubiya, Chifwe, Chiyeyi, Chimbukushu, Mbalangwe, Chitotela and others. Although Silozi, which is Zambian, is used (for communication) in the region, it is not an indigenous Namibian language and the majority of the people in the region are not comfortable with it (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). Gacheche (2010) says that there is a wrong assumption that if teachers can speak the child’s L1 then they can teach it. This could be one of the many reasons why “education ministries lax about providing specific training for L1 teachers” (Gacheche, 2010, p. 21). Another challenge points at the lack of instructional materials, which according to Gacheche (2010), hinders the transmission of content in local languages. A study by Abidogun (2012) points out that the use of mother tongue poses huge challenges and thus affects the successful implementation of the language policy. Deteriorating the situation further is the fact that:

There is a poor sale of books written in mother tongue by publishers, writers, and booksellers which discourages them from investing in publishing books in mother tongue. Reading in mother tongue is a far cry than reading in English (Mathooko,



2009, cited in Abidogun, 2012, p. 46). Mathooko, (2009, cited in Abidogun, 2012, p. 46) further argues that it was erroneously believed that producing materials in mother tongue for teaching in schools was expensive and a waste of time.

A study conducted on the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in the schools in the region established that:

Most teachers indicated dissatisfaction regarding the type of books that were used in lower grades, adding that these translated books lacked a cultural background rooted in Silozi and brought in difficult words like *bondate* (father) at an early stage before learners had learned the consonant **n** and the necessary vowels. Simple words in English were very difficult when translated into Silozi. Words like *dog* or *boy* translated into Silozi became *nja* and *mushimani* respectively. Materials were not systematically adapted to gradually build the child's reading skills. (Namibia. Ministry of Basic Education and Culture, 1996, p. 268).

Mathooko (2009, cited in Abidogun, 2012, p.46) additionally states that "some mother tongues lack a developed orthography, while others have no written form". He moreover says it is difficult to represent some aspects of mother tongue in writing such as the tones synonymous with African languages. Similarly, Namibia. Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (1996, p. 269) in a study conducted on African Languages in Basic Education reports that "teachers were concerned about the Silozi orthography, and that in all the schools that were visited teachers had no knowledge of the Silozi orthography". The study further claims that teachers were not able to introduce sounds of the letters of the alphabet, and if they did, it resulted into a mixture of pronunciation. Teachers were worried about the inferior quality of reading materials they used, which according to them were not ideal for beginner readers without preprimary support or background (MBEC, 1996). In the same study, teachers advocated for training in Silozi on principles of teaching as well as methodology and orthography (MBEC, 1996).

## **2.5. Significance of the study**

The study sheds light on what exactly happens in our lower primary classrooms, the difficulties novice teachers face during SBS, and what needs to be done in order to address the encountered challenges. It also reveals some of the variables and gaps that contribute to poor learner performance in the schools. It also sensitizes programme designers regarding key issues to consider when developing new programmes. Sensitizing programme designers with key issues is important because if learners are not started on a strong foundation, they are likely to encounter problems even in their future grades.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study is qualitative and takes the form of an intrinsic case study. An intrinsic case study aims at describing a program by evaluating its effectiveness. It enables the researcher to learn about a phenomenon by studying a single case in more details (Johnson and Christensen, 2012, Springer, 2010, & Stake, 1995). The study does not make generalizations and the idea is to understand and have a picture of the problems students face during SBS when they teach in mother tongue.

#### **3.2 Population**

The study targeted two Bachelor of Education, Pre and Lower Primary Education student teachers at the University of Namibia, Katima Mulilo Campus. The two student teachers were on SBS at two different schools in the Zambezi Region of Namibia. The study targeted the student teachers because I wanted to establish the challenges they faced regarding the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in their lower primary classrooms.

#### **3.3 Sampling**

A sample of two student teachers was drawn qualitatively from two different SBS support schools in the Zambezi Region. Both of them were Bachelor of Education final year student teachers who specialized in Pre and Lower Primary Education. I used the convenience sampling technique to draw my sample. This sampling technique was used because I needed a sample that was easy to reach or access. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p. 155), convenience sampling “ involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained or those who happen to be available and accessible at the time”. “The researcher simply chooses the sample from those to whom she has easy access” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 156).

#### **3.4 Data Collection**

Data were collected through interviews and classroom observation. Two Pre and Lower Primary Bachelor of Education (Honours) final year student teachers were studied. One student teacher taught in Grade 2, and the other one taught in Grade 3. Both student teachers were interviewed and their lessons were observed. Both the observations and the interviews were transcribed into English.

#### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed qualitatively and no generalizations of the results were made. Patterns and themes were identified. Themes were classified into categories.



## 4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### 4.1. Speaking or expressing themselves in the language

This study revealed that student teachers had a problem with expressing themselves in mother tongue. This challenge could be attributed to the fact that not all inhabitants of the Zambezi region speak Silozi in their communities, but speak different dialects of Silozi language like Chifwe, Chisubia, Mbalangwe, Chiyeyi, and Chimbukushu. Furthermore, Silozi is not a Namibian indigenous language, but an adopted language from Zambia (Namibia (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). Therefore speaking Silozi confidently and fluently and using it as medium of instruction in class became a huge challenge for the student teachers.

When they were asked to share some of the problems they faced in the classrooms regarding teaching in mother tongue, they had the following to say:

Student Teacher X (for Grade 2):

*Speaking the language itself was a problem since some words in English are difficult to translate into Silozi, and therefore had to teach them like that (in English).*

Student Teacher Y (For Grade 3):

*I found it difficult to express myself well in Silozi because of my Chisubia background. It is very difficult to assist learners with an English background. They were only helped by translating into English and this was time consuming.*

### 4.2. Writing the words and the Silozi orthography

The student teachers indicated that they faced a huge challenge when writing words in Silozi. They claimed that some words in English had no Silozi equivalence and thus wrote them in English. Mathooko (2009, cited in Abidogun, 2012) says that some mother tongues lack a developed orthography, while others have no written form, thus making it difficult for our novice teachers to teach through them (mother tongues). Additionally, the Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (1996, p. 269) in a study conducted on African Languages in Basic Education reports that, "teachers were concerned about the Silozi orthography, and that in all the schools that were visited; teachers had no knowledge of the Silozi orthography".

The participants had the following to say on the writing of words:

Student Teacher X (For Grade 2):

*Writing the words in Silozi was difficult. Had them in Silozi but in an English form. Some of the topics were in English and not in Silozi.*

Student Teacher Y (For Grade 3):

*Was difficult, and most Silozi words took an English form.*

About how to overcome this challenge, the students had this to say:

Student Teacher X (For Grade 2):

*I asked the support teacher to assist, and if she failed, we wrote the words in English.*

Student Teacher Y (For Grade 3):

*I wrote them in an English form.*

I observed that the two student teachers struggled to write Silozi words correctly because the two schools where they were practicing to teach did not have the Silozi orthography.

#### **4.3. Planning lessons in mother tongue**

The study revealed that the two student teachers faced a problem regarding the planning of lessons. Lower Primary lessons are to be taught in Silozi and should be planned in Silozi. I observed that their lessons were planned in English and taught in Silozi.

When they were asked why they did it that way, they responded as follows:

Student Teacher X (For Grade 2):

*It is difficult to plan a lesson in mother tongue. Lessons were planned in English, even if it was a Silozi lesson, because it was easy than planning in Silozi. Activities were planned in Silozi.*

Student Teacher Y (For Grade 3):

*Lessons were planned in English. It was a school principle to plan lessons in English. Silozi lessons were also planned in English and taught in Silozi. Only the assessment part was done in Silozi. The preparation form layout was written in English and not in Silozi. This made it very difficult to plan Silozi lessons on an English form, but I was always assisted by my support teacher.*

#### **4.4. Translating words from English to Silozi**

I observed that student teachers had a problem when translating words from English to Silozi. For example, the word 'phonics' was written as 'lifonetiki' instead of 'milumo' which is the correct Silozi word for 'phonics'.

They gave the following as reasons for this:

Student Teacher X (For Grade 2):

*This was due to that other words are difficult to translate since there are no individual Silozi words for such words. One word in English could be a clause in Silozi.*





Student Teacher Y (For Grade 3):

*Translating concepts from English to Silozi is difficult. You cannot find concepts. Some English words have no Silozi concepts.*

When they were asked how they addressed the problem, they said:

Student Teacher X (For Grade 2):

*I asked the support teacher to assist, and if she failed, we wrote the words in English.*

Student Teacher Y (For Grade 3):

*My support teacher helped me with the words.*

#### **4.5. Lack of materials to use during Silozi lessons**

This study established that the student teachers were confronted with a lack of teaching materials in their classrooms. They said that there were no relevant materials to use. According to Gacheche (2010) the challenge of a lack of instructional materials hinders the transmission of content in local languages. Moreover, research in a study conducted on mother tongue in the region by the Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (1996, p. 268) says that materials

Materials were not systematically adapted to gradually build the child's reading skills. The study continued to reveal that teachers were worried about the inferior quality of reading materials they used, which according to them were not ideal for beginner readers without preprimary support or background.

This is what the student teachers did to contend with the situation:

Student Teacher X (For Grade 2):

*I improvised, and made my own materials in line with the lesson topics I taught.*

Student Teacher Y (For Grade 3):

*I got assistance from the library.*

I also observed that in most of their lessons students used the same teaching aids as they used in their English Language lessons, more especially story books. They simply adapted English stories in their Silozi lessons provided they were in line with that day's topic.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The issue of Silozi as mother tongue and medium of teaching and learning (TaL) in schools in the region has been an area of great concern for many years now in the Zambezi Region. It is on the basis of these concerns that this study recommends the following:



- a) The Silozi orthography should be made available to all the schools in the region;
- b) Teachers should receive intensive training on how to teach through the medium of Silozi;
- c) Lessons that are taught through the medium of Silozi should be planned in Silozi and not in English and taught in Silozi;
- d) There should be Silozi dictionaries to assist teachers with translations; and finally
- e) There should be relevant Silozi teaching materials.

## 6. CONCLUSION

It is important to note that the acquisition of a foreign language is strengthened by the child's first language. This first language should be the child's mother tongue. This study describes such language as the language the child acquires from birth. Silozi as medium of instruction from Grade 1 to Grade 3 in the region is an adopted language, and it is however not a true and holistic reflection of the languages spoken in various communities in the region. If this is not corrected, it will weaken the effectiveness of the language policy in the region.

## 7. REFERENCES

- Abidogun, B.G. (2012). *Teachers' experiences of using Yoruba as a medium of instruction in primary classes: Implications for learning*. Submitted In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Philosophiae Doctor, University of Pretoria.
- Gacheche, K. (2010). Challenges in implementing a mother tongue based language in education policy: Policy and practice in Kenya. *POLIS Journal*, 4, p.1-45.
- Johnson, B. & Christensen, L. (2012). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). London, UK: SAGE.
- Ministry of Education and Culture. (1993). *Namibia national conference on the implementation of the language policy for schools: Language and the environment*. Namibia, Windhoek: Longman Namibia.
- Ministry of Education and Culture. (1993). *Toward education for all: A development brief for education, culture, and training*. Namibia, Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan.
- Ministry of Basic Education and Culture. (1996). *African languages in basic education: Proceedings of the first workshop on African languages in basic education*. Namibia, Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan Publishers.
- Murray, S. (2005). *Class notes*. Department of education. South Africa, Grahamstown: Rhodes University.
- Ndamba, G.T. (2008). Mother tongue usage in learning: An examination of language preferences in Zimbabwe. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2 (4), pp.171-188.
- Phiri, M., Kaguda, D., & Mabhena D. (2013). The mother tongue as media of instruction debate revisited: A case of David Livingstone Primary School in Harare, Zimbabwe.

- Journal of Emergency Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies (JETERAPS)*, 4 (1), pp. 47-52.
- Robertson, S.A. (2005). *Culture and education: Teaching notes*. South Africa, Grahamstown: Rhodes University.
- Springer, K. (2010). *Educational research: A contextual approach*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- UNESCO. (2008). *Improving the quality of mother tongue- based literacy and learning: Case studies from Asia, Africa and South America*. Thailand: UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education.
- Yazici, Z., Ilter, B.G., & Glover, P. (2010). How bilingual is bilingual? Mother tongue proficiency and learning through a second language. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 3 (18), pp. 259-268.