

## Chapter 12

# Challenges in Multilingual High-Density Government Secondary School Classrooms in the Midlands Province in Zimbabwe

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Midlands is multi-linguistic and multicultural province situated at the heart of Zimbabwe, and Gweru is its major city where people from different parts of the country converge. Many languages including Shona, Ndebele, Zim English, Chewa, Zulu, and Venda are spoken. This study aimed to explore challenges in multi-lingual high density government secondary school classrooms in the Midlands province in Zimbabwe. The study used a qualitative approach involving document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. A purposive sampling was used, and three high density government secondary schools were selected. Nine teachers and 30 learners participated in the study. Data were analyzed by using thematic analysis. Findings have shown a number of challenges, which include lack of confidence among learners, resource constraints, and lack of trained teachers. The study suggests that school management committees should obtain adequate learning materials for learners. Governments should organize professional development courses to train teachers on how to handle multilingual classes.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A multi-lingual classroom has elements like regional language, the local language and learners' mother tongue (Malone, 2007) and this linguistic diversity is a prominent feature of many classrooms today. While students carry complex linguistic repertoires and identities, it remains an issue how these complexities are in fact valued and mobilized in teaching and learning. The term multilingualism is derived from two Latin words namely "multi" which means many and "lingua" which means language (Bussmann 1996). Thus multilingualism is referred to as the ability of a speaker to express himself or herself in several languages with equal and native like proficiency. Multilingualism can also be regarded as the co-existence of several languages within a society (Lyons 1981). Bussmann (1996) however argues that, sometimes multilingualism is used interchangeably with bilingualism, that refers to the ability to speak two languages with native like proficiency. Multilingualism is considered in this study as an inclusive terminology comprising bilingualism (ability to speak two languages proficiently), trilingualism (ability to speak three languages) and there are also instances whereby one speaker has the ability to speak even more than three languages. A multilingual classroom therefore is a classroom with learners having more than one language at their disposal (irrespective of level of competence). Using a qualitative approach which involved the analysis of learners' written academic essays, semi-structured interviews and observing learners in a normal classroom learning; this chapter discusses multilingualism and translanguaging in a multilingual setup. It also discusses theoretical issues as they relate to Zimbabwe and looks at the problems and issues in multilingual classroom and the way forward in overcoming challenges in Zimbabwe language classrooms. Lastly it looks at the conclusions and comes up with recommendations.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

It is important to note that Zimbabwe was a former British colony that got its independence in 1980. The education system before independence was initiated by the missionaries and controlled by the government. Two major languages were considered, that is English and Shona/Ndebele. Though minor languages were considered, English was the official language of communication. Batibo (2005) and Jakaza (2013) have observed that, Zimbabwe like many other African countries, is a multilingual country whose members speak many languages. Together with English there are 16 officially recognised languages in Zimbabwe. However, Chabata (2008) argues that the linguistic situation in Zimbabwe is very complicated in that watertight demarcation lines on where language begins or ends are difficult to draw. A similar point is advanced by Nkomo (2012) by arguing that Zimbabwe does not have a clearly recorded national language policy that can be referred to.

In independent Zimbabwe, a child starts learning at an Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centre at the age of 4 years. Primary education starts at Grade 1 at the age of 6. Grade 7 examinations are written at the age of 12. Form 1 to Form 4 is done between ages 13 to 16. At the age of 17, Form 5 starts with Form 6 written at the age of 18. University starts at the age of 19; so would college and other forms of tertiary education if the learner did not go to a college after Form 4. ECD and primary education allow a local language to be used side by side with English as a language of instruction. English is the language of instruction from high school up to University level. Universities allow African languages students to write theses in the African languages, otherwise all research is conducted in English. Parliament, commerce, industry, banking, tourism, use English as the official language.

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