

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE MISMATCH ON ECD LEARNERS' COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT IN MATOBO DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of language mismatches on the cognitive development of Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners in Matobo District, Zimbabwe. With a focus on the challenges faced by teachers and learners in multilingual classrooms, the research investigates how language barriers between teachers and learners, particularly when teachers are not fluent in the dominant local languages (Ndebele and Kalanga), affect early learning outcomes. Data were collected from three purposively selected primary schools through interviews with teachers, school administrators and focus group discussions with parents. The findings revealed significant challenges in communication, with Shona-speaking teachers and some Ndebele and Kalanga-speaking teachers struggling to teach effectively in languages that were not their own or the learners' first languages. This mismatch was found to hinder learners' cognitive development, as they faced difficulties in understanding and retaining lesson content. Stakeholder perspectives from teachers, school administrators and parents highlighted the negative impact of these language mismatches on academic engagement and performance. The study also found strong dissatisfaction among parents, who advocated for the recruitment of teachers fluent in the local languages. Based on these findings, the study recommends that teacher recruitment and professional development strategies prioritise local language proficiency to ensure that teachers are better equipped to meet the linguistic needs of ECD learners. Future research should examine the potential benefits of bilingual or multilingual education models in such contexts, as well as the broader implications of language mismatches on other aspects of child development.

Keywords: Language mismatch, Early Childhood Development, Cognitive development, Language of instruction, Teacher proficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

The choice of instructional language in Early Childhood Development (ECD) education significantly influences cognitive and academic outcomes for young learners. In Zimbabwe, the Education Act (Chapter 25:04), amended in 2006, mandates the use of indigenous languages as the medium of instruction at the ECD level (Government of Zimbabwe, 2006). This policy aligns with international educational standards advocating mother-tongue instruction to improve comprehension, support cognitive development and enhance academic performance (UNESCO, n.d.). Research indicates that children taught in their native languages demonstrate stronger conceptual understanding, problem-solving abilities and higher academic achievement (Shil, 2023).

Matobo District, located in Matabeleland South Province, highlights ongoing challenges in implementing Zimbabwe's mother-tongue education policy. The district's rural economy depends

on subsistence farming, with Ndebele and Kalanga as the dominant indigenous languages (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2023). Linguistic diversity is compounded by historical migration patterns, where Kalanga communities incorporate dialects such as Lilima and traditions from neighbouring regions (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2023). Despite constitutional mandates for indigenous language instruction (Government of Zimbabwe, 2006), national teacher deployment strategies frequently overlook regional needs, resulting in Shona-speaking educators being assigned to Ndebele- and Kalanga-majority classrooms (Sikhumbuzo Moyo, 2024). Approximately 67% of ECD teachers in Matabeleland South lack formal qualifications, which exacerbates communication barriers and hinders foundational cognitive development (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2023). This mismatch contradicts decentralised recruitment policies designed to prioritise local language proficiency (Sikhumbuzo Moyo, 2024). For example, recent disputes over non-Ndebele-speaking teachers in Bubi constituency highlight the gap between policy intent and implementation (Sikhumbuzo Moyo, 2024).

Language mismatch in education can negatively affect cognitive development. Teaching children in a language they do not fully understand often reduces their ability to grasp lessons, limiting critical thinking and cognitive growth (Downing, 2019). In Matobo District, this problem appears as lower learner engagement, slower progress in literacy and numeracy and poorer academic results. The gap between the language used by teachers and that of the local community worsens these issues because the language of instruction may not reflect learners' cultural experiences (Moyo, 2021).

International case studies highlight the benefits of mother-tongue instruction in early education. For example, Finland's use of Finnish as the language of instruction in primary education has been linked to high literacy and numeracy rates among learners (Sahlberg, 2021). Similarly, research on the Welsh education system shows that integrating Welsh as a medium of instruction has revitalised the language and improved academic outcomes for students (Jones and Martin-Jones, 2021). These examples show the positive impact that mother-tongue education can have when it is well implemented.

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of language mismatches on the cognitive development of Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners in Matobo District, Zimbabwe, focusing on the region's unique linguistic and cultural context. The specific objectives are to assess the prevalence of language mismatches in ECD classrooms, examine their effects on learners' cognitive outcomes, explore stakeholder perspectives on the issue and identify strategies for addressing these challenges. The study also aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for aligning teacher deployment practices with the linguistic needs of learners, thereby supporting the effective implementation of Zimbabwe's mother-tongue instruction policy. This research is driven by the need to bridge the gap between policy and practice in mother-tongue education and seeks to offer insights that can inform broader educational reforms, particularly in linguistically diverse regions. Ultimately, the study contributes to the literature on language and education in Africa, advocating for a culturally responsive approach to early childhood education that recognises the pivotal role of language in cognitive and cultural development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of cognitive development, which emphasises the importance of language as a medium through which cognitive processes are developed. Vygotsky (1978) argued that language, particularly the mother tongue, is not merely a tool for communication but a fundamental means by which children understand and interact with the world around them (Vygotsky, 1978). This view is especially relevant in the context of Early Childhood Development (ECD), where language plays a crucial role in shaping cognitive outcomes, including memory, problem-solving and conceptual understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, learners are most capable of constructing meaningful knowledge when they engage with content in a language that they can readily comprehend (Vygotsky, 1978).

Empirical studies support the assertion that mother-tongue instruction enhances cognitive development in multilingual environments. For example, Heugh (2022) and Cummins (2021) found that learners taught in their first language perform better academically, as they can more easily connect new information with their existing cognitive structures (Heugh, 2022; Cummins, 2021). In Ethiopia, Heugh (2022) showed that learners taught in their mother tongue demonstrated a deeper understanding of academic content than those taught in a second language. These findings align with Vygotsky's theory by demonstrating the cognitive benefits of a linguistically appropriate environment.

This study specifically extends Vygotsky's framework to examine the implications of language mismatches in ECD settings in Matobo District, Zimbabwe. Teacher language proficiency plays a significant role in cognitive engagement and effective learning. Research by Chimhenga and Ncube (2020) highlighted the struggles faced by learners in Zimbabwe when teachers are not proficient in the local languages, pointing to a gap in the literature regarding the cognitive impact of such mismatches in early education settings (Chimhenga and Ncube, 2020). This gap is addressed by this study, which focuses on the cognitive outcomes of language mismatches for ECD learners.

The Role of Language in Cognitive Development

The impact of language on cognitive development has been well-documented in multilingual educational settings, particularly in Africa. Studies have consistently shown that mother-tongue education improves cognitive performance, memory retention and conceptual understanding, particularly in the early stages of education. For instance, research in Zambia (Mkandawire, 2022) demonstrated that children taught in their local languages outperformed those taught in English in various cognitive tasks, including reading comprehension and mathematical problem-solving. Similarly, Benson (2018) found that Kiswahili, being a widely spoken indigenous language in Tanzania, significantly improved cognitive engagement among learners when used as the medium of instruction.

In contrast, language mismatches in the classroom hinder cognitive development. Jongore (2020) observed that in multilingual contexts where the teacher was not fluent in the learners' first language, learners exhibited lower academic performance. The cognitive challenges of language mismatches become more pronounced in early childhood education, as children at this stage rely

heavily on language to develop foundational cognitive skills (Simanjuntak and Damanik, 2024). A study by Ndlovu (2023) also found that learners in Zimbabwe struggled to engage with academic content when their teachers were not conversant in the local languages. These findings underline the importance of teaching in the learners' mother tongue, as it enhances cognitive processes essential for early learning. While the cognitive benefits of mother-tongue education are well-documented, research on the specific impact of language mismatches in early childhood development (ECD) settings is sparse, especially in Zimbabwe's linguistically diverse regions. This study addresses this gap by examining how language mismatches between teachers and learners in Matobo District affect cognitive development. The study aims to explore how such mismatches impede early learning and cognitive engagement, particularly in regions where Ndebele and other local languages are dominant.

Teacher Deployment and Linguistic Mismatches

One of the major challenges highlighted in recent academic research is the misalignment between teacher deployment and the linguistic needs of learners. Teacher proficiency in local languages is crucial for effective teaching and learning, especially in early childhood education. However, studies in Zimbabwe have shown that teachers are often assigned to regions where they are not fluent in the local language, which creates barriers to instruction and learner engagement (Mheta and Mashiri, 2022). For instance, in Matabeleland, where Ndebele is the predominant language, many teachers deployed to ECD and primary schools are Shona speakers, resulting in significant communication challenges and reduced educational outcomes (Mheta and Mashiri, 2022; Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2021). Research further indicates that the lack of teaching resources in indigenous languages and the shortage of teachers trained in these languages hinder the successful implementation of mother tongue education policies (Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2021). In some cases, non-local language-speaking teachers have to rely on colleagues for translation or use English and Shona, which does not adequately support learners who understand only the local language (Mheta and Mashiri, 2022). These issues highlight the importance of aligning teacher deployment with the linguistic context of the communities they serve.

The concerns regarding teacher deployment were voiced in a ZimLive article by Machaya (2019), where the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) raised alarms about the recruitment of teachers who were not conversant in the local languages of Matabeleland. The PTUZ's criticism centred on the fact that the language of instruction at infant levels is supposed to be the mother tongue of the pupils. Despite this, the new list of recruited teachers included many with Shona surnames, particularly for positions in predominantly Ndebele-speaking areas. This disconnect between teacher language proficiency and the linguistic realities of local communities has sparked widespread dissatisfaction among parents and teachers.

Further demonstrating the consequences of such mismatches, a protest by parents at Mbembesi Primary School in Matabeleland South, as reported by ZimEye (2021), highlighted the frustrations of parents whose children were struggling to understand lessons due to language barriers. Parents argued that teachers who could not speak the local languages, especially Ndebele, were impeding their children's learning, contributing to declining pass rates in the region. This study aims to build on these concerns by investigating the cognitive implications of language mismatches in ECD classrooms in Matobo District.

Research on teacher deployment in Africa suggests that these challenges are not unique to Zimbabwe. Kamwendo (2018) found that in Malawi, teachers who were not proficient in the local languages faced similar difficulties in fostering meaningful interactions with learners. In Kenya, Kioko et al. (2019) noted that teachers deployed to regions where they were unfamiliar with the local languages experienced communication breakdowns, leading to disengagement and poor academic performance. The findings from these studies suggest that teacher language proficiency plays a crucial role in facilitating effective learning, especially in the early years. This study aims to explore the extent to which language mismatches in Matobo District hinder cognitive development among ECD learners, thereby contributing to the literature on teacher deployment in multilingual contexts.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Language Mismatches

Understanding the perspectives of various stakeholders (teachers, parents and education officials) is essential to gaining a comprehensive view of the challenges posed by language mismatches. In Zimbabwe, the deployment of teachers who are not fluent in local languages has sparked significant concern among parents and teachers alike. In the case of Mbembesi Primary School, as reported by ZimEye (2021), parents were vocal in their objections to the deployment of teachers who did not speak Ndebele, arguing that their children were unable to fully engage with the curriculum. These concerns have been echoed in various other parts of Matabeleland, where parents have protested against the hiring of teachers without knowledge of the local languages (Machaya, 2019; Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2021).

In response to such concerns, Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has recognised the need for teachers in early childhood education to be conversant with the local languages, as reflected in the 2015 Education Act (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015). However, as indicated by the protests and ongoing dissatisfaction in Matabeleland, there is often a disconnect between policy and practice. The PTUZ has consistently argued that teachers recruited to work in linguistically diverse areas should be selected based on their proficiency in the local languages to ensure that learners receive education in a language they understand (Machaya, 2019). This study seeks to explore the perspectives of both teachers and parents in Matobo District, where language mismatches are prevalent. Understanding their experiences and concerns will offer valuable insights into the impact of language on cognitive development and inform policy recommendations aimed at improving teacher deployment and language practices in early childhood education.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, guided by an interpretivist research philosophy. The interpretivist paradigm was chosen for its emphasis on understanding participants' subjective experiences within their social contexts, making it suitable for exploring the impact of language mismatches on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners' cognitive development in Matobo District (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). This approach allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers, school administrators and parents perceive and navigate language mismatches in the classroom and how these issues affect learners' educational outcomes. The interpretivist philosophy is particularly relevant when exploring the

meanings and social dynamics of complex issues, such as the intersection of language, education and cognitive development.

The research design was exploratory and descriptive, aiming to capture the experiences of participants while examining the relationship between language mismatches and cognitive development in ECD learners. Descriptive research allows for a detailed understanding of the influences that language mismatches have on learning outcomes, while exploratory design is essential for investigating emerging issues that have not been widely researched, such as the cognitive impact of language mismatches in Matobo (Babbie, 2016). Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used as the primary data collection instruments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 ECD teachers and 6 school administrators, including the school head, deputy head and Teacher In Charge (who is responsible for the administration of the ECD department in each school). These school administrators were selected as key informants due to their in-depth understanding of the school's operations and their role in managing language-related issues in the classroom. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask open-ended questions while providing participants with the flexibility to share their experiences and insights regarding language proficiency and instructional practices. Previous studies have shown the effectiveness of semi-structured interviews in gathering context-specific data on educational practices (Mheta and Mashiri, 2022; Ndlovu and Sibanda, 2021).

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 4 groups of parents, each consisting of 6–8 participants, for a total of 28 parents. The parents were selected from the same three primary schools. FGDs are particularly useful for exploring community-based issues, as they provide participants with the opportunity to interact with one another and share collective experiences, which can yield deeper insights into shared concerns regarding language mismatches in the classroom (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). In this study, FGDs allowed parents to discuss how language barriers in the classroom impact their children's learning, particularly when teachers are not proficient in the local languages. The inclusion of parents was informed by research indicating that family engagement is vital to early childhood education, particularly in linguistically diverse contexts (Mkandawire, 2022; Kamwendo, 2018).

Participants were purposively selected from three primary schools in Matobo District, chosen for their linguistic diversity. The main languages spoken in these communities are Ndebele and Kalanga, with smaller communities of Tswana speakers and a minority of Shona speakers, mainly due to the presence of individuals deployed in government and NGO departments in the area. These schools were selected because they reflect the region's linguistic balance, providing an ideal setting for exploring how language mismatches affect ECD classrooms. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to focus on schools that represented the linguistic realities of the area, ensuring that the sample was relevant to the research objectives. The selection of school administrators, including the school head, deputy head and Teacher In Charge, aimed to capture diverse perspectives on how language-related challenges are addressed at the administrative level, particularly with regard to teacher deployment and instructional practices. Stratified random sampling was applied in selecting the parents to ensure adequate representation of the different linguistic groups within the communities, including Ndebele, Kalanga, Tswana and Shona

speakers. This method increased the representativeness of the sample and ensured that all linguistic groups within the study setting were considered (Cohen et al., 2018).

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Prevalence of Language Mismatches in ECD Classrooms

The language mismatch issue was evident across all three selected schools, where Ndebele and Kalanga were predominantly spoken at home. Shona-speaking teachers, as well as some Ndebele and Kalanga-speaking teachers, expressed challenges in teaching in a language that was either unfamiliar or not their first language. Shona-speaking teachers were particularly vocal about the difficulties they faced. One Shona teacher (Interview 3, 2024) shared:

“When I came here, I didn’t know a word of Ndebele. The children were speaking to me in Ndebele and I felt completely lost. I had to rely on a few colleagues who spoke Ndebele, but it’s still difficult. I sometimes feel like I’m failing them because I can’t communicate properly.”

On the other hand, a Kalanga-speaking teacher (Interview 7, 2024) shared how they had navigated the issue differently:

“I come from a Kalanga-speaking background and although Ndebele is a bit different, I can understand some of the basics. It’s still hard, though. I do what I can, but I feel like I’m not reaching all the children, especially those who don’t speak either Kalanga or Ndebele fluently.”

A Ndebele-speaking teacher (Interview 5, 2024) expressed similar frustrations, particularly when they observed the lack of Ndebele-speaking teachers in the classroom:

“It’s hard to watch a teacher who can’t speak the children’s language. When I speak to the children in Ndebele, I can see the light in their eyes. They understand better. But when the lesson is in Shona or English, you can feel the disconnect. The children don’t engage as much.”

This theme highlighted the common experience of language barriers in ECD classrooms, where the lack of alignment between teachers’ language skills and the children’s home language created significant challenges in effective communication and lesson delivery.

Effects of Language Mismatches on Cognitive Development

The language mismatches between teachers and learners had clear implications for cognitive development, as many teachers reported difficulties in conveying ideas, concepts and instructions effectively. A Ndebele-speaking teacher (Interview 6, 2024) explained:

“When the language of instruction is not the same as the child’s home language, it affects how they process information. I have seen that they struggle to remember what they’ve been taught and it takes them longer to grasp basic concepts.”

A Kalanga-speaking teacher (Interview 9, 2024) reflected on how these cognitive challenges played out in the classroom:

“Children in early childhood education are still building their basic cognitive skills. If they cannot fully understand the teacher’s language, they miss key

opportunities to develop their thinking. They also have trouble with their memory. It's like they are being asked to learn in a language they are not fully familiar with."

Parents in the focus group discussions (FGD 2, 2024) were also very concerned about the cognitive impact on their children. One parent from a Ndebele-speaking family lamented:

"My child doesn't understand what the teacher is saying. He comes home frustrated and when I ask him what he learned, he doesn't know. It's not his fault. He is trying, but the language barrier is too big. It's so hard to see my child struggle like that."

Another parent, from a Kalanga-speaking household, shared:

"How can my child succeed when the teacher speaks a language that he doesn't understand well? It's affecting his ability to learn and develop the skills he needs to do well in school. He's confused every day."

The evidence strongly suggests that language mismatches significantly hindered cognitive development, as learners were unable to fully grasp lessons, understand concepts, or retain information due to the language barrier.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Language Mismatches

The perspectives of teachers, school administrators and parents all aligned in recognising the language mismatch issue as a major obstacle to effective education. However, each group focused on different aspects of the problem. Teachers, particularly those who were not fluent in Ndebele or Kalanga, expressed frustration and concern about the impact on their learners. One teacher (Interview 4, 2024), a Shona speaker, shared her struggle:

"I don't feel I am reaching the learners as I should. The children are confused and so am I. When they don't understand what I'm teaching, I feel like I'm failing them. This situation makes me question whether I'm in the right place, especially when I see the local teachers so much more effective in their communication."

School administrators were equally concerned about the impact of the language mismatch. One administrator (Interview 8, 2024) commented:

"We see that learners are disengaged when they cannot understand the teacher. It affects their confidence and participation in the classroom. I'm worried about how we can provide the quality of education these children deserve when the teachers are not equipped to teach in their language."

Parents, particularly in the focus groups, expressed intense frustration with the ongoing deployment of teachers who were not fluent in the local languages. One Ndebele-speaking parent (FGD 1, 2024) vented:

"It is not right that teachers who don't speak our language are teaching our children. Why should we have teachers who don't know our languages? There are young people in this community who have completed their studies and are qualified

to teach, but they are unemployed. The government is bringing in Shona-speaking teachers who can't even communicate with the children. This is not fair!"

Another parent, from a Kalanga-speaking community, added:

"We have so many young people in our village who could teach these children in their own language, but they are sitting at home without jobs. Instead, the government is bringing in teachers who are not from here and don't understand our children. It's an injustice."

These perspectives reveal the deep dissatisfaction among parents and the community regarding the recruitment and deployment of teachers who do not speak the local languages.

Strategies for Addressing Language Mismatches

To address the language mismatch issue, teachers, school administrators and parents suggested several strategies. Teachers advocated for targeted language training, with some expressing a desire for more structured professional development in Ndebele and Kalanga. One Shona teacher (Interview 2, 2024) explained:

"I need more training in the language of the community. If I could understand Ndebele or Kalanga better, I would be able to teach the children more effectively. I want to help the children, but the language barrier is a real problem."

School administrators also recommended a more thoughtful approach to teacher recruitment, prioritising language proficiency. One administrator (Interview 7, 2024) argued:

"Teacher recruitment should be based on the language needs of the community. It's essential that teachers deployed to ECD classes can speak the local languages fluently. It would make such a difference in how the children learn."

Parents in the FGDs called for immediate action from the government to rectify the situation. One parent (FGD 3, 2024) stated:

"The government should hire teachers who can speak our languages. If they are serious about improving education, they need to stop hiring teachers who can't communicate with our children. We need teachers who understand the local languages and culture."

Another parent echoed the need for local community involvement:

"The government should look at the people in our community who are qualified to teach. There are many of us here who can speak the language and have been trained. Why are they bringing in teachers who can't communicate with our children?"

These findings indicate a clear call for teacher training, recruitment and deployment policies that align with the linguistic and cultural needs of the community, to ensure more effective learning outcomes.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the impact of language mismatches on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners' cognitive development in Matobo District, Zimbabwe, a region where Ndebele and Kalanga are the dominant languages spoken at home, yet many teachers are deployed from outside the community with varying levels of proficiency in these languages. The findings of this study align with and extend previous research on the cognitive implications of language mismatches in multilingual educational contexts, particularly in early childhood education.

Prevalence of Language Mismatches in ECD Classrooms

The prevalence of language mismatches observed in this study is consistent with findings from previous studies, particularly in regions where linguistic diversity intersects with teacher deployment policies. In Matobo District, Ndebele- and Kalanga-speaking children were often taught by teachers who either did not speak their home language fluently or did not speak it at all. This observation is congruent with a media article by Machaya (2019), which highlighted that in Zimbabwe, teachers are often deployed to regions where they are not proficient in the local languages, such as the deployment of Shona-speaking teachers to predominantly Ndebele-speaking areas. The gap between the language of instruction and the language spoken by children has been identified in the literature as a significant barrier to effective learning (Simanjuntak and Damanik, 2024).

The experience of Shona-speaking teachers in the study (who expressed feelings of inadequacy and frustration due to their lack of proficiency in Ndebele) reflects broader issues discussed in the literature, such as the challenges faced by teachers who are not fluent in the local languages. These teachers' struggles echo the concerns raised by the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) regarding the mismatch between teacher language skills and community language needs (Machaya, 2019). As Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) suggests, language is not merely a tool for communication but a vital medium through which children construct knowledge. The lack of proficiency in the local languages among teachers thus impedes their ability to facilitate meaningful cognitive development in their learners, particularly in the formative years of ECD.

Effects of Language Mismatches on Cognitive Development

The findings from the primary data indicate that the language mismatch in ECD classrooms had clear cognitive implications for learners. Teachers reported that children were struggling to grasp basic concepts, remember instructions and engage meaningfully in lessons when the language of instruction differed from their home language. This finding is supported by the theoretical framework of this study, grounded in Vygotsky's view that language plays a central role in cognitive development. As Vygotsky argued, children's cognitive processes, such as memory and problem-solving, are mediated through language. If children are not able to understand the language of instruction, they face significant cognitive challenges in processing information, which in turn affects their academic performance and overall cognitive development.

This cognitive disadvantage is reinforced by empirical studies, such as those by Heugh (2017) and Cummins (2017), which show that children taught in their mother tongue are able to better connect new information to their existing cognitive structures, resulting in improved academic performance. In this study, both teachers and parents noted that children in Matobo District faced

difficulties in processing and retaining information when the language used in instruction was not their own. The primary data reveals a recurring theme: children who were taught in a language they did not fully understand struggled with memory retention and conceptual comprehension. This finding resonates with the work of Heugh (2017), who demonstrated that learners perform better cognitively when instructed in their first language.

Further, the experience shared by a Ndebele-speaking teacher (Interview 6, 2024) about the challenges of cognitive development under language mismatches parallels findings in studies from Zambia (Mkandawire 2022) and Tanzania (Benson, 2018), where children taught in their local languages exhibited superior cognitive outcomes compared to those instructed in a second language. The study by Mkandawire (2022) also emphasised that language mismatches lead to disengagement and hinder cognitive development, as children struggle to process lessons delivered in a language they do not understand well. These findings collectively highlight the critical importance of mother-tongue instruction in fostering optimal cognitive development in multilingual settings.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Language Mismatches

The perspectives of teachers, parents and school administrators in this study all aligned in recognising the language mismatch issue as a significant barrier to effective education. Teachers voiced frustrations regarding their inability to effectively teach when they were not fluent in the language spoken by the children. This sentiment mirrors the concerns raised in the literature by Machaya (2019), who discussed the feelings of inadequacy among teachers in Matabeleland when faced with the challenge of teaching in languages they do not speak fluently. School administrators echoed these concerns, noting the impact of language barriers on learner engagement and learning outcomes. Similarly, parents expressed dissatisfaction with the ongoing deployment of teachers who could not speak the local languages, reinforcing the findings of ZimEye (2021), where parents at Mbembesi Primary School voiced strong objections to teachers who did not speak Ndebele.

The frustration expressed by parents, particularly in the focus group discussions, is consistent with previous studies that highlight the importance of community involvement in education. In Zimbabwe, as well as in other African contexts, parents and local communities have raised concerns about the mismatch between teacher deployment and the linguistic needs of learners (Machaya, 2019; Kamwendo, 2018). The study also contributes to this discourse by highlighting the need for teacher recruitment policies that prioritise language proficiency in local languages, as emphasised by both school administrators and parents in the current study. This call for language-sensitive recruitment practices aligns with findings from studies by Chimhenga and Ncube (2020) and Kioko et al. (2019), who argued that teacher deployment policies should be more attuned to the linguistic realities of local communities.

Strategies for Addressing Language Mismatches

The strategies proposed by stakeholders in this study (targeted language training, improved teacher recruitment policies and increased community involvement in education) echo the recommendations found in the literature. Teachers, particularly those who were not proficient in the local languages, advocated for language training programs to help them communicate more effectively with their learners. This demand for professional development aligns with the

recommendations of Heugh (2017) and Cummins (2017), who emphasized the importance of equipping teachers with the linguistic skills necessary to teach in multilingual contexts.

School administrators also recommended that teacher recruitment be based on linguistic proficiency, particularly in the languages spoken by the local community. This aligns with the findings of Kamwendo (2018) and Kioko et al. (2019), who argued for a more context-specific approach to teacher deployment, ensuring that teachers are fluent in the local languages to foster better communication and learning outcomes. Parents echoed this sentiment, calling on the government to hire teachers who are proficient in the local languages, as they believe this would improve the quality of education and enable their children to learn effectively.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the impact of language mismatches on cognitive development in Early Childhood Development (ECD) classrooms in Matobo District, Zimbabwe, with particular attention to the challenges faced by teachers and learners in a multilingual context. The findings highlighted the significant difficulties that arose from the mismatch between the languages spoken by teachers and the home languages of the children, particularly in classrooms where Ndebele and Kalanga were predominantly spoken. The language of instruction, often Shona or English, did not align with the learners' first languages, leading to communication barriers that hindered the effective transfer of knowledge. This, in turn, affected the learners' ability to grasp concepts, engage with the curriculum and retain information, contributing to cognitive challenges. These results are consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasises that language plays a fundamental role in cognitive development, particularly in early childhood education. Supporting this framework, previous studies have also demonstrated that learners perform better when taught in their first language, as it facilitates deeper understanding and cognitive engagement.

Moreover, the study found a shared recognition among teachers, school administrators and parents regarding the adverse effects of language mismatches. Teachers, particularly those not fluent in Ndebele or Kalanga, reported significant challenges in delivering lessons effectively, leading to disengaged learners who struggled with comprehension and retention. School administrators expressed concern over the detrimental impact on learner participation and the overall quality of education. Parents were particularly vocal in their frustration, with many arguing that local youth, who were qualified and fluent in the local languages, were being overlooked in favour of teachers from other linguistic backgrounds. This dissatisfaction reflected a broader concern about the mismatch between education policies and the linguistic realities of the community.

The findings point to several key recommendations. First, there is a need for the government and education authorities to prioritise language proficiency in the recruitment and deployment of teachers, particularly in ECD settings where language plays a central role in cognitive development. Teacher recruitment should take into account the linguistic diversity of the region, ensuring that teachers are proficient in the local languages, such as Ndebele and Kalanga. In addition, targeted professional development programmes should be introduced to enhance teachers' language skills, especially for those working in areas where they are not familiar with the dominant local languages. The recruitment of teachers from the local community, who are

already fluent in the language, should also be considered as a means of improving communication and cultural understanding in the classroom.

Future research should continue to explore the long-term effects of language mismatches on cognitive development in early childhood education, particularly in regions with high linguistic diversity. Studies could investigate the potential benefits of bilingual or multilingual instructional models, which would incorporate both the local languages and the official language of instruction. Further research could also examine how language proficiency affects other aspects of early childhood development, including social and emotional growth and whether certain teaching strategies can mitigate the impact of language barriers. Such studies would contribute to the development of more effective and contextually appropriate educational practices, promoting better learning outcomes in multilingual communities.

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