

Evaluating the status of the Ndaou language in education ten years after its official recognition

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Abstract

The 2013 constitutional changes in Zimbabwe recognised Ndaou as a distinct language, alongside other minority languages, to promote linguistic diversity. Before this, only Ndebele and Shona were national languages, and English was the sole official language, marginalising many indigenous languages. Despite the policy change, Ndaou education still faces challenges, particularly in Chipinge and Chimanimani, where it is predominantly spoken. This study investigates these challenges through interviews and document analysis. The findings indicate that Ndaou is often perceived as a Shona dialect, leading to its replacement by Shona in some schools. Additionally, the study uncovered other challenges, such as the lack of trained Ndaou-speaking teachers, instructional materials, and positive attitudes towards the language. The study discusses the broader social, political, and educational implications of these issues and offers recommendations for improving the teaching and learning of Ndaou.

Keywords: Ndaou, minoritised languages, language policy, teaching and learning, Zimbabwe, Chipinge and Chimanimani

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the challenges facing the teaching and learning of Ndaou in the Chipinge and Chimanimani districts in the Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe, following the 2013 changes in the language policy that recognised Ndaou as a distinct language. The 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution has been praised for recognising the country's linguistic diversity, a significant shift from previous constitutions that recognised only two indigenous languages. In Section 6(1) of the Constitution, it is stated that the "following languages, namely, Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndaou, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign Language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda, and Xhosa are the officially recognised languages in Zimbabwe." This constitutional provision has accorded official language status to these previously marginalised languages, including Ndaou. Before these changes, "English was the only recognised national official language, i.e., the official language, while Ndebele and Shona [were] the official national languages, i.e., national languages" (Ndlovu 2013: 14). Six languages (namely Kalanga, Tonga, Sotho, Venda, and Shangani) were regarded as the official minority languages, with the rest just referred to as minority languages.

Despite this official recognition, Ndaou's role in key domains such as government, media, technology, and particularly education, remains limited over ten years later. This study seeks

to understand why Ndaou has not gained substantial traction in the education sector despite its official status. One reason that might be explained is the government's lack of support for Ndaou (Sithole 2017). Before the 2013 constitutional change, Ndaou was regarded as a dialect of Shona. This classification was influenced by factors such as former President Robert Mugabe's belief that Zimbabwe's future and unity would be best guaranteed through a single language, Shona, leading to the suppression of Ndaou (Mlambo 2013). Additionally, the colonial government grouped many ethnolinguistically diverse groups together for ease of administration, a situation that resulted in some languages, like Ndaou, being subsumed by others (Dube 2016).

The colonial and postcolonial language policies in Africa, including Zimbabwe, often favoured linguistic centralisation, viewing multilingualism as a problem (Bamgbose 2000). Such policies led to linguistic assimilation, linguistic loss, and discrimination against linguistic minorities (Eades 2006). In Zimbabwe, English became the language of power, administration, and education, further marginalising indigenous languages and eroding the cultural identities of their speakers. The 2013 Constitution was a response to this historical marginalisation, recognising minority languages as part of nation-building and cultural revival efforts.

Among the historically marginalised languages that were accorded official status in the 2013 Constitution, Ndaou is the only one that was “promoted” from the status of a dialect to a full-fledged language, as the rest were hitherto recognised as distinctive languages. Recognising Ndaou as a language rather than a dialect can encourage the development of educational and policy initiatives that support the language, which has the added advantage of potentially leading to greater social and economic opportunities for speakers. Additionally, the official recognition of the language can boost research and documentation efforts, which will help in the revitalisation and maintenance of the language for future generations. One implication of this is that more resources might be needed to be developed in Ndaou than in other languages, which has implications for the teaching and learning of the language. Thus, the present study examines the current status of Ndaou in the Zimbabwean classroom and the challenges facing the teaching and learning of Ndaou in Zimbabwe ten years after its officialisation.

Given that studies on the classroom success of Shona and Ndebele, such as those by Bernsten (1994), Nyaungwa (2013), Viriri and Viriri (2014), and Gora (2015) for Shona, and Mugore (1995), Ndhlovu (2006), and Matsa et al. (2018) for Ndebele, are well-documented, this study addresses the gap in research regarding Ndaou's implementation in education after its official recognition. By exploring the challenges of teaching and learning Ndaou ten years after its officialisation, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the role of minority languages in African education, thus addressing Makoni's (2011) observation that scholarly work in this area remains sparse.

1.1 Ndaou language

Ndaou is a cross-border Bantu language spoken by a combined population of about 1.5 million speakers in Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Eberhard et al. 2024). According to previous studies, the language varies geographically, with two main dialects, Shanga (spoken in the Sofala Province) and Danda (predominantly spoken in Manica Province) in Mozambique, and three dialects in Zimbabwe: Ndaoundaou and Garwe (spoken in Manicaland province) and Tonga (spoken in Masvingo province) (Mutonga 2017).

Ndaou exists in a multilingual society where it is spoken alongside other languages like Shona, Ndebele, English, and Shangani in Zimbabwe, as well as Portuguese, Sena, and Ute (Tewe) in

Mozambique. Such multilingual environments often present a linguistic hierarchy where the more prestigious languages are used in official domains, while the minoritised ones are relevant only in the more private domains, such as family, community, and religious circles. As a result, the minoritised languages often tend to be under-documented and understudied because they rarely have standardised orthographies, grammars, dictionaries, and other materials to enhance their enforcement in high-order domains. This is the situation of Ndau in both countries. Ndau is labelled a minority language in Zimbabwe for two reasons: speaker population and the language policy that has for 82 years characterised it as a dialect of Shona. With a speaker population of about 800,000 in Zimbabwe (Eberhard et al. 2024), Ndau cannot be compared with Shona, which boasts about 9 million speakers or Ndebele, with over 2 million speakers.

Sithole (2017) indicates that Ndau speakers (especially among the younger population) no longer see any incentive to develop proficiency in the language as it plays no functional role in their essential day-to-day lives apart from interpersonal communication. Instead, they concentrate on getting and becoming fluent in prestigious languages like Shona and English in Zimbabwe or Portuguese in Mozambique. According to Batibo (2005), this gives rise to both language shift and language death, as the number of speakers of minority languages diminishes from generation to generation.

2. Indigenous languages in education in Zimbabwe

Language choice in the context of education is a hotly debated issue in highly multilingual societies (Muchenje et al. 2013). While the 2013 Constitution has given official recognition to Ndau and other minoritised languages, scholars maintain that Zimbabwe still needs an official language document that focuses explicitly on using African languages in education (Chivhanga & Chimhenga 2013). The language-in-education policies currently implemented in Zimbabwean classrooms are inferred from education and language-related laws and acts. For example, the 2013 Constitution simply listed the languages that are “officially recognised” without specifying their roles in education. There is, therefore, no doubt that the lack of a clear language policy in education would affect the teaching and learning of Ndau in schools, as different schools might interpret related laws differently.

According to the 1987 Education Act of Zimbabwe and the 2015 Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education (Government of Zimbabwe 2015), indigenous languages should be used as media of instruction in primary schools up to Grade 2, while they should be taught as school subjects in areas where they are predominantly spoken from Grades 3-7. Incidentally, the only two indigenous languages recognised for this purpose in the 1987 Act were Ndebele and Shona. However, there are many other areas where neither Ndebele nor Shona is the first language of the majority of people (Makoni et al. 2006). In such places, people are compelled to learn and use either Ndebele or Shona, either of which is not their first language (L1), making these languages feel alien to them. For instance, in Hwange, Ndebele is taught as a school subject and is used as the medium of instruction, yet Nambya is the language of the majority of the people. In fact, in many contexts, English is predominantly used as the language of instruction across levels of education (Mlambo 2013). To maximise the benefits of learning in one’s first language (Cook 2001) and ensure greater linguistic inclusivity, all Zimbabwean children should learn in their first languages (Viriri 2003; Viriri & Viriri 2013).

Makoni (2011) argues that most African parents prefer their children to be taught in English rather than indigenous languages because they believe that speaking/learning (in) comes with

some additional benefits, such as upward social mobility (Chabata 2008; Chivhanga & Chimhenga 2013). Such language preference for English tends to lead to social stratification as well as undermine the advancement of indigenous languages in education. Kadenge and Nkomo (2011) suggest that the increased role of English in education is at the expense of other indigenous languages, which is further exacerbated by the prominence of English in the global linguistic market (Chivhanga & Chimhenga 2013) that tends to negatively influence the attitudes of learners towards indigenous languages in the context of education (Phiri et al. 2013).

In Zimbabwe, as much as in other postcolonial contexts, the history of language choice in education is steeped in colonialism (Makoni 2011). Magwa (2010) points out that during the colonial era, education in Southern Rhodesia was significantly conducted through the medium of English and that at the end of primary-level education, children were expected to speak the English language fluently, while local languages were perceived as only relevant for private communication. Hence, Magwa (2010) posits that Zimbabwe simply inherited from Rhodesia a racially structured system of education that marginalised local languages.

Another major factor that shapes attitudes towards the role of indigenous languages in education in Zimbabwe is the inclusion of such languages in the public examinations. Given that the Zimbabwean education system is examination-driven (Mufanechiya 2012), any languages not examined in the public examinations are not regarded as useful. From the students' point of view, the indigenous languages are considered unimportant because most of them are not examined in the public examinations. Consequently, most schools do not see any need to teach these languages. A further consequence of this attitude is that there are often limited instructional materials for the teaching and learning of these languages (Muchenje et al. 2013).

A number of studies have investigated the roles of indigenous languages in the Zimbabwean education system. For instance, Makoni et al. (2008) use archival evidence in the form of annual reports by administrators to show how Tonga, one of the historically minoritised languages in Zimbabwe, is successfully being promoted as a language of instruction in Tonga-speaking areas by community members. Specifically, the study found that Tonga language activists were instrumental in lobbying for the promotion and development of Tonga in their community, a finding that underscores the role of stakeholders such as community activists in the promotion of minority languages in education.

Similarly, Mutasa (1995) identified orthography as a significant obstacle to the teaching and learning of Tonga in the classroom, based on which the author argued that the availability of codificatory materials such as dictionaries, grammar, orthographies, and other materials contributes to the adoption of a language in the classroom (Crystal 1997). In other words, languages that lack these materials are less likely to be adopted in the classroom. This point is relevant to the present study as Ndaou might not have sufficient codificatory materials when compared to Shona and Ndebele due to many years of marginalisation in public domains, including the classroom. Part of the focus of the present study, therefore, is to investigate the extent of the availability of these codificatory materials in Ndaou and their implications for teaching and learning the language in Zimbabwe.

Maphosa (2021) examines the use of Kalanga in primary schools in Zimbabwe. In specific, the study investigated the environmental factors affecting the implementation of Kalanga in language-in-education policy. The study argues that most times people tend to look to outside factors that impede the adoption of minority languages in education, emphasising that linguistic ecological factors such as institutional support and resources, language ideologies, modernisation, language contact, and ethnolinguistic identity, among others, shape the adoption of Kalanga and other minoritised languages in the Zimbabwean classroom.

Chivhanga & Chimhenga (2013) highlighted the relationship between Zezuru, Karanga, and other Shona dialects in the teaching and learning of Shona in Zimbabwean schools. The study focused on how Zezuru, as a Shona dialect, has influenced the performance of students sitting for ordinary-level Shona examinations in secondary schools. The current Shona orthography does not include many elements from other Shona languages, making it difficult for students who speak marginalised Shona languages (such as Ndaou) to perform well in such public examinations.

3. Methodology

In order to understand the perceptions of education stakeholders regarding the teaching and learning of Ndaou in Zimbabwe, the qualitative approach was considered sufficient to collect relevant data. Since Ndaou is spoken predominantly in Chipinge and Chimanimani districts of Zimbabwe, a purposive sampling technique was adopted in order to select schools in this region where it is expected that Ndaou should be used as the language of instruction or taught as a school subject. Four primary schools (two each from each district, with one in the urban area and one from the rural area) were purposively chosen: Ngangu and Nyangu primary schools in Chimanimani, and Bangwe and Charuma primary schools in Chipinge. Participants were drawn from among teachers (5), students (5), parents (4) and Ndaou linguists (2). These four categories of participants were considered the relevant stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning in the region. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour.

The semi-structured interview was the primary instrument used for data collection, which allowed the study to burrow into the feelings, attitudes, and thoughts of the participants about the adoption of Ndaou in the classrooms in regions where they are spoken. The use of semi-structured interviews offered us the flexibility to explore unexpected issues while maintaining a focus on specific research questions, which provided in-depth, richer insights that are unlikely to emerge in more rigidly structured methods or surveys. Another reason for the choice of semi-structured interview is that scholars have established its usefulness in investigating minority languages in education (Gu 2018). The interview guide included items that were fairly broad enough to allow the interviewer to pursue the lines of thought and ideas emanating from the interviewees' responses.

Interviews were complemented with the analysis of relevant policy documents in order to nuance our understanding of the situation. Since useful insights about beliefs, agendas, and ideologies can be gleaned through documents (Makoni et al. 2008), the study included data related to language policy from the 2013 Constitution, which officially recognises 16 languages, including Ndaou, and the 2015 Education Curriculum. Document analysis was a crucial method in this study as language provisions and policies, which form the basis of Ndaou's teaching and learning, are contained in the documents. The multi-method approach to qualitative analysis, involving description, interpretation, and explanation, was adopted for the

analysis. Data from both data sources were presented thematically, aggregating the statements into themes.

4. Results and discussion

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to examine the role of Ndaun in Zimbabwean classrooms. In specific, the study attempted to identify factors affecting the teaching and learning of Ndaun in primary schools. The general findings regarding the teaching of Ndaun are presented first before delving into the specific factors mentioned in the dataset.

4.1 The teaching and learning of Ndaun in primary schools in Chipinge and Chimanimani

Overall, our analysis of the interview data revealed that respondents were in agreement that Ndaun is not offered as a school subject in the primary schools in Chipinge and Chimanimani districts. All the respondents stated that Shona is the only indigenous language taught in schools. One respondent attributed the situation to teachers' lack of interest in teaching Ndaun. While wide-ranging reasons were mentioned as to why Ndaun is not being taught in schools (which will be discussed in full below), many tended to focus on the teachers. For example, two other respondents stated thus: "I do not know the reason; maybe teachers cannot communicate in Ndaun" and "Maybe there are no specialised teachers to teach the language." One recurrent point is that the respondents believed that the situation of Ndaun in their classrooms is a concern. As one respondent put it, "Ndaun is not taught...if it was taught, I would be happy because it is our mother tongue; it would enhance my proficiency," which underscores the need to teach Ndaun in schools as speakers not only recognise it as a separate language but see it as a marker of their identity.

However, 5 respondents unanimously mentioned that few Ndaun speakers who are activist teachers have attempted to teach Ndaun, but their efforts were fruitless, as they encountered many challenges. It was also found that some teachers had incorporated some Ndaun lexical items in their Shona classrooms, arguing that Ndaun is just a dialect of Shona. Despite the fact that many government policies (such as the 2013 Constitution of Zimbabwe, the Education Act of 2020 (as amended), the 2015-2022 Education Curriculum of Zimbabwe, and the National Development Strategy 1) contain statements that directly or indirectly encourage the teaching of the 16 indigenous languages of Zimbabwe in schools, especially in regions where they are spoken, the above findings indicate that this is not the case, particularly with regard to Ndaun. Among other factors, this could be attributed to the historical marginalisation of Ndaun.

The 2015 Education Curriculum Framework identifies languages as one of the eight areas constituting the curriculum at primary schools. According to Section 4.4.1, "the language learning area comprises indigenous, English, and foreign languages." Some scholars (e.g., Magwa 2010) have argued that the specific mention of English in this policy but not any other indigenous language automatically gives English a higher premium and, by the same token, marginalises all the indigenous languages. It may be argued that English might as well be subsumed under the umbrella of "foreign languages" since none of the indigenous languages were mentioned, not even Shona and Ndebele. The prominence of English has resulted in Englishised classrooms where English has become the sole language of instruction in many schools, including in some places where Shona or Ndebele could easily serve as the language of instruction.

Section 4.4.1.1 further states that “at junior school level, indigenous languages remain important; the introduction of a second language and its alternate use [should coexist] with indigenous language in the learning.” While this section maintains that as a second language (i.e., English) is introduced at the junior school level, it should be taught side by side with the first language (an indigenous language) in primary schools. In line with this policy, it is expected that Ndaou should be the language of instruction (or at least taught as a school subject) in primary schools in Chipinge and Chimanimani districts. However, our findings show that the opposite is the case. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that this policy statement is unclear about how both a second language and the indigenous language can be alternately used as a medium of instruction in the classroom. In other words, there is no bilingual pedagogical framework that provides the strategies for the simultaneous implementation of two languages in the classroom, without which the use of two or more languages for teaching is bound to fail (Hansell & Björklund 2022). This situation justifies Bamgbose’s (1991: 11) claim that language policies are often characterised by “...avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness.”

The 2006 Education Act was further amended in 2020 to allow it to align with Section 6 of the 2013 National Constitution that recognised 16 indigenous languages. Thus, Section 12 of the Amended Education Act of 2020 provides as follows:

- (1) Every school shall endeavour to—(a) implement the teaching of all official languages; (b) ensure that the language used in class for instructions be the one that is examinable; (c) ensure that early childhood education shall use the mother tongue as the language of instruction.
- (2) School curricula will showcase the cultures of the people in every language being taught.
- (3) Language use in terms of subsections (1) and (2) shall be subject to—(a) the State to avail all required resources; and (b) to avail trained personnel, that is, teachers, examiners, textbooks, and other materials needed to enhance teaching.

The recommendations are clearly worthy of commendation, as they clearly make allowance for the use of all officially recognised indigenous languages in the classroom. However, the broad findings presented above show that these recommendations are yet to be implemented. The results presented in the next section will show whether the government has fulfilled its obligations regarding the policy, as well as highlight other factors influencing the (non-)implementation of the new policy in primary schools in Chipinge and Chimanimani districts of Zimbabwe.

4.2 Factors affecting the teaching and learning of Ndaou in Chipinge and Chimanimani

Having outlined the general findings in the previous section, this section discusses the specific factors affecting Ndaou in the classroom, as emerged from our analysis of the interview data.

4.2.1 Lack of instructional materials

The lack of instructional materials is a significant factor affecting the teaching and learning of Ndaou in primary schools. The lack of teaching materials can result from inadequate corpus planning, which has implications for spelling, grammar books, dictionaries, and literature. Interviews held with teachers (most of whom are native speakers of Ndaou) showed that they have the desire to teach Ndaou to their students but are inhibited by the unavailability of

grammar books, dictionaries, standard orthographies, or literature to support their teaching. According to one teacher, the only materials they have access to are the Ndaub Bible and other Christian texts like hymn books from the United Church of Christ and Reformed Church of Zimbabwe: “We have no material for us to teach Ndaub; what we have are bibles and hymn books.”

While some of the teachers indicated that these religious texts helped them in their efforts to teach aspects of Ndaub, they are inadequate as they were designed for religious purposes and not for pedagogical purposes. It has been widely acknowledged that one of the “most widespread and commonly recognised challenge[s] for minority language education is the availability of high-quality teaching material” (van Dongera et al. 2017: 7). There is, therefore, an urgent need to design instructional materials to enhance the teaching and learning of Ndaub.

However, the teachers acknowledged that there have been pockets of efforts geared towards developing teaching and learning materials in Ndaub. They pointed out that these efforts have been uncoordinated as they are merely individual efforts made by Ndaub language activists rather than by experts in corpus planning and materials development. On many occasions, materials in minoritised languages tend to be developed by activists whose only ‘skill’ is their passion to see the language survive in the classroom, thus impacting the quality of the materials (van Dongera et al. 2017). Clearly, this is also an indication of the government's lack of support. However, while it is absolutely important that the government provide support for the language from corpus planning to instructional materials, relying completely on that might be defeatist. Since there are individuals who have started some work and there are teachers and linguists who have the necessary skills, Sithole (2017) has proposed that there is an urgent need for these stakeholders to synergise in order to achieve their aims.

4.2.2 Unavailability of trained teachers

The analysis also revealed that another factor that affects the teaching and learning of Ndaub in primary schools is the lack of trained teachers who have both the knowledge of the language and the pedagogical competence to teach Ndaub. It was reported that most teachers in regions where Ndaub is spoken are not proficient in the language. In other words, even if these teachers wanted to teach the language, there is no way they can do so since they do not speak the language fluently, thereby making it difficult for Ndaub to be taught as an academic subject, let alone used as the language of instructions in primary schools within Chipinge and Chimanimani districts of Zimbabwe where the majority of community members speak Ndaub as their first language. As one parent lamented, “We don’t have teachers; they are nowhere to be found. The government must train Ndaub teachers. Our children are troubled with Shona in schools.”

Research has shown that teaching learners using their native language as a medium of instruction is important because it helps learners not only to understand and conceptualise what they are taught but also to think in their language and feel at home with the learning process (UNESCO 2022). UNESCO presents compelling arguments that, for effective learning to take place, it is better for young learners to be taught in their home language, which is often the language they think in.

The interview findings show that the government had set up a teacher training programme at the Great Zimbabwe University to train teachers in indigenous languages and make it possible for indigenous languages to be taught in primary and secondary schools. However, it was found

that due to the historical mainstreaming of Ndebele and Shona, trainee teachers tend to be interested in enrolling in them. Perhaps they might be easier to teach since there are instructional materials available. As a result, other minoritised languages, such as Ndaou, are not included in the university's teacher training programmes. There is no doubt that having more fluent speakers of Ndaou who are trained specifically to teach it in schools will contribute to the increased presence of Ndaou in Zimbabwean classrooms.

Moreover, responses from some of the teachers indicate that few of them who have attempted to teach Ndaou as an academic subject in primary schools did not undertake any training as language teachers. In fact, some of them are teachers of subjects who depend solely on their intuition to teach Ndaou to their pupils. It was found that most of the teachers are speakers of Shona, some of whom hold strong views that Ndaou is a distinct language. For these ones, only the teaching of Shona matters. This flawed perspective might be attributed to the lack of training, as it's believed that someone who spent years learning (the pedagogy of) Ndaou is better positioned to know that Ndaou is a different language with its own structure and grammar, which has long been established in the literature (Sithole 2019).

4.2.3 Non-inclusion of Ndaou in public examinations

Our results indicate that the non-inclusion of Ndaou as one of the languages examined in Grade 7 of the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) examinations affects its adoption as a school subject in the region. Teachers indicated that most parents wanted their children to learn a language they could write in the public examinations, which in this case is Shona. Zimbabwe is an examination-driven society (Mufanechiya 2012), so most people might consider the non-inclusion of a language in public examinations as an indication that the language has low prestige. As a result, parents and perhaps even schoolchildren themselves tend to want to be associated with more prestigious languages such as English and Shona. Some of the teachers who have attempted to teach Ndaou maintained that their efforts failed because the pupils aspire to write Ndaou in the Grade 7 examinations. In other words, the schoolchildren and their parents do not see any value in spending their resources learning a language that is not available for them to write in public examinations. One of the teachers put it this way: “Why will they learn Ndaou and when it's not being examined at Grades Seven and Four?”

Even though there is an ongoing debate about whether the inclusion of minoritised languages in public examinations contributes significantly to their maintenance, there is emerging evidence that children indeed feel empowered when they know they are going to write an examination in their language. While preparing for these examinations might help to deepen their proficiency in the language, perhaps a great value is that it gives them a sense of recognition. As Marzena Henry (a teacher who campaigns for the inclusion of minority languages in public examinations) puts it, “in terms of children's self-development and resilience, it's very important for them to be able to take exams in their own language” (Marzena 2023: n.p.). This factor clearly links with the previous challenges of inadequate instructional materials and the lack of qualified teachers. It will amount to putting the cart before the horse to include Ndaou as an examinable subject in ZIMSEC Grade 7 when there are no adequate arrangements to teach it in the classroom.

4.2.4 The dynamics of language attitudes

Related to the above factor is the issue of language attitudes among Zimbabweans. Interviews with students, teachers, and parents indicated that there is a general negative attitude towards

indigenous languages in general and towards Ndau in particular. According to Magwa (2010), the attitudes of education stakeholders, such as students, parents, and teachers, towards the use of indigenous languages greatly affect the teaching and learning of these languages. Teachers, including those who speak Ndau as their first language, maintained that it was more beneficial to the students to learn in English and Shona instead of Ndau, as many of them considered Ndau of less value to them. A negative attitude towards Ndau-by-Ndau speakers inevitably means that Ndau will likely continue to play second fiddle to English and Shona despite being officially recognised in the Constitution.

Other teachers further maintained that Ndau is not of importance as their pupils proceed to high schools or tertiary institutes where Ndau is neither used as the language of instruction nor offered as a school subject; thus, it is considered fruitless to teach Ndau as it is not relevant to future academic studies. One of the teachers, a native speaker of Ndau, also mentioned her experience at a tertiary institute, where, during a presentation, other students laughed at her because of her Ndau-influenced accent when speaking English and Shona. Hence, the teacher maintained that it was better to teach English and Shona as they are more acceptable in society and other learning institutes beyond areas where Ndau people reside. Another respondent confirmed that Ndau speakers are mocked in public when they speak their language: “I was laughed at when I first came to UZ [University of Zimbabwe]. When I wanted to speak to others, everyone would laugh at me and mock me by saying Ndau speakers are witches and wizards, and some [of them] eat other human beings. I don’t want my sister to learn it. Where will she use it?”

Another respondent corroborated the point that speakers of other languages use demeaning metaphors to characterise speakers of Ndau: “Those who see it [Ndau] as bad feel that they are witches, as seen from referring to the language as the language of Ndunge (the late renowned witch doctor). Such negative attitudes affect the children who should learn the language.”

Attitudes such as these have a significant role to play in pupils’ self-esteem and confidence in their mother tongue. In some contexts, languages like Ndau may be associated with certain socioeconomic and cultural stereotypes, which can impact individuals’ identification with such languages. According to Popkins (2024: n. p.), “[i]t’s common for majority groups to denigrate minority languages and—by implication—their speakers and communities—as primitive, backward, worthless, gobbledygook, of no use, dead...the list of insults goes on.” As shown in the interview excerpt above, the respondent does not want her sister to learn the language, perhaps not only in school but also outside the school environment.

Interviews with parents also revealed that parents’ views significantly impact the teaching and learning of Ndau. Some parents indicated that while their children could learn Ndau as an academic subject, English remained a priority for them. This attitude clearly results from the high prestige English enjoys in the wider society. English is often associated with opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility, unlike Ndau, which is used in informal domains and restricted to areas where Ndau speakers reside.

The significant role of language attitudes in shaping the motivation to learn minoritised languages has been well discussed in the literature (Rosiak 2023). In fact, attitudes are so important that they can shape the implementation of language policies. Even if the government has provided all the necessary institutional support (such as instructional materials) and there

are well-trained teachers of Nda, negative attitudes of speakers will continue to impede the successful teaching and learning of the language in schools (Nyaungwa 2013). Hence, perhaps more than anything else, there should be increased investment in creating awareness regarding the value of using indigenous languages in Zimbabwe.

4.2.5 Lack of government support

The last factor affecting the learning and teaching of Nda, as revealed by our respondents, is the lack of commitment from the government. While the government has been praised for enacting laws and policies that, in theory, encourage the promotion of indigenous languages in Zimbabwe, most of our respondents think that the government is only paying lip service to the situation as it has not backed any of the policies with actions. Some might argue that official recognition is the necessary first step towards the promotion of minoritised languages. However, mere recognition not backed up by implementable actions does not change anything.

Ten years after the 2013 National Constitution awarded previously marginalised languages official status, the government has yet to set aside any budgetary allocation towards the provision of instructional materials and the training of teachers in the minoritised languages. One of our respondents, a teacher, put it quite directly: “It is the government’s role to provide a platform for the training of teachers and provision of materials.” Another interviewee, a former university lecturer, decried the situation in the following way: “I used my own funds to publish Grades 1 and 3 Nda textbooks. I did not receive any funding from the government. To make matters worse, publishers are so hesitant to publish Nda material because there is no market for the books.” Language activists believe that the government recognises minority languages only for political expediency (Dube 2013).

While it is hoped that the “government will have to honour language policies in place and the new Constitution that places an obligation on government to promote local languages” (Dube 2013: n. p.), Thomas Sithole, a language rights activist, encourages local groups to mount pressure on the government by lobbying for government intervention in promoting their languages (Dube 2013). While it is true that local communities play significant roles in sustaining their languages, the government should still perform its role by providing the necessary institutional support that enables minoritised languages to thrive in society, including in the classroom. In sum, it has been established that “institutional support is necessary, for example, for the production of teaching material, language planning, language courses, awareness raising, (in-service) teacher training, and information on educational methods in all levels of education, to mention but a few areas” (van Dongera et al. 2017: 26).

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that despite various government policies advocating for the inclusion and promotion of indigenous languages, Nda remains marginalised in the educational landscape. Factors such as the absence of Nda as a school subject, scarcity of instructional materials, shortage of trained teachers, non-inclusion in public examinations, negative language attitudes, and lack of government commitment collectively contribute to the current state of affairs.

The findings underscore the urgent need for concerted efforts to address these challenges and promote the teaching and learning of Nda. It is imperative to develop comprehensive instructional materials tailored for Nda to support effective teaching. Moreover, initiatives to train proficient Nda-speaking teachers should be prioritised to ensure quality language

education delivery. Additionally, advocating for the inclusion of Ndaу in public examinations can enhance its perceived value and motivate students to learn the language.

Addressing negative language attitudes towards Ndaу is crucial for fostering pride and acceptance of indigenous languages among Zimbabweans. Public awareness campaigns highlighting the cultural and linguistic value of Ndaу and its importance in national identity can help shift perceptions positively. Furthermore, governmental commitment is essential in providing necessary resources and implementing policies that support the promotion of Ndaу and other indigenous languages in education. In sum, concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including government bodies, educators, parents, learners, community groups, and language activists, are indispensable in realising the full potential of Ndaу in Zimbabwean classrooms.

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