

CHAPTER 10

The impact of pupils' background and school context

Analysing implications of second language learning for the curriculum designer

Hedwick Chinyani, Rugare Mareva and Jonatan Muzangwa
Great Zimbabwe University

INTRODUCTION

The advent of British colonial rule saw the introduction of the English language as the medium of instruction in the formal schooling system in present day Zimbabwe, in the midst of several linguistic groups. Major linguistic groups in Zimbabwe comprise chiShona and isiNdebele. Other indigenous languages spoken by a small percentage of the population include Tshivenda, Sesotho, isiXhosa, Tshikalanga, Shangani and Ndau. As was the trend in all European colonies in Africa, the medium of instruction in schools was the language of the colonial master. For the purposes of this chapter it is worth noting that the majority of schools in Zimbabwe are rural and the dominant language in these communities is the mother tongue. In the elite urban schools, English may be the first language (L1) but in other schools, children come from diverse linguistic and social backgrounds and the only time they come into contact with English, the L2, is at school. Two forms of learning take place simultaneously in the school, that is, learning the prescribed content of the curriculum and learning the L2 (English), the medium through which the curriculum is delivered. In Zimbabwe, passing English Language is imperative. The L2 is accorded high status in determining entry into colleges for professional training, and for employment. Even when students pass other subjects with distinction, their certificate is not valid if they do not pass English. Sadly, English Language records large numbers of failures in public examinations at Grade 7 and Ordinary Level (Form 4). This underscores the importance of English Language in the education system of Zimbabwe.

It is a truism that for effective learning to occur, there has to be a medium of instruction, that is, a language. Whorf (in Edwards 1979) advances the 'Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis', which states that language influences thought. A language influences the ways in which its speaker perceives the world and therefore his or her cognitive functioning. Language, therefore, serves many functions. Among these, Yule (1985:6) mentions the transactional function, that is, '... humans use their linguistic ability to communicate knowledge, skills and information'. Wells (in Wells & Nicholls 1985:39) also summarises the importance of language in learning, both at home and in schools, saying:

... for it is through the power of language to symbolise 'possible worlds' that have not yet been directly experienced, that parents, and later, teachers can enable children to encounter new knowledge and skills and to make them their own.

Cohen and Manion (1981) emphasise the salience of understanding the instructional language in the learning process when they say that it would be impossible for a child to either learn specific skills or develop his potential ability until he can speak, understand, read and write the language that is used in school. It can therefore be inferred that understanding of certain skills may be extremely difficult for children learning through the medium of a second language. In Zimbabwe, children from various socio-linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds are all expected to learn through the medium of English, a second language. It is against this backdrop that this chapter examines the interplay between school location, socio-economic background and English language learning in Zimbabwe.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter is couched in the terms of the 'Deficit Hypothesis' proposed by Bernstein. Bernstein (in Edwards 1979) claims that language can limit what a child learns, and how they learn it. As a result, language sets limits within which subsequent learning can take place. The theory further claims that '... the linguistic tools of some lower class children are just not up to the demands made by the school ...' (Hudson 1980:214). Bernstein contends that in society, there exist two speech codes, which he calls the elaborated and the restricted codes. Bernstein associates the elaborated code with members of the higher classes in society. In Edwards (1979), Bernstein asserts that the elaborated code is relatively explicit and makes fewer assumptions about the learner's knowledge. It is the kind of speech that the school requires.

Other characteristics of the elaborated code include grammatical and syntactical accuracy, use of complex sentences and a wide range of adjectives and adverbs. Since this code is the desired language in the school, the teacher is likely to have a positive attitude towards pupils who use it, pupils from the middle class.

On the other hand, the restricted code, which Bernstein associates with the lower classes, is relatively inexplicit. Bernstein claims that it makes greater assumptions about knowledge shared by the hearer. Users of this code construct short and simple sentences, limited and often unfinished use of adjectives and adverbs, among other defects, characterise this code. Bereiter (in Haralambos 1995:773) shares Bernstein's view, adding that the speech habits of many children from lower class backgrounds are

... hopelessly inadequate to meet the requirements of the educational system, particularly its failure to deal with higher level concepts ... retard intellectual development, impede progress in school and directly contribute to educational failure.

This suggests that a common curriculum derived from a selection that erroneously assumes that all children possess the same linguistic competence disadvantages children from lower class backgrounds.

Bourdieu (1990) supports Bernstein's argument by introducing the concept of 'habitus' and 'cultural capital'. He asserts that schools have a certain cultural capital that is the habitus of the middle class and which they employ as if all children have access to it. Children of the working class would be disadvantaged in that the cultural capital is not explicitly made available to them, yet schools demand it as a measure of success. Thus, Bourdieu queries the justification of a curriculum that regards pupils as equals and takes as natural what is essentially a social and cultural gift.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter sought to explore the relationship between learning English as a second language in Zimbabwe and the learner's socio-economic background. It also sought to establish whether the context in which the school is located has an influence on the learning of the English language.

The chapter was guided by the following research questions:

- Does a child's socio-economic background influence the learning of English as a second language?
- Is there a relationship between the location of a school and second-language learning?

This research study was carried out using data from the performance of Grade 5 pupils from three broad educational contexts in Zimbabwe, viz. urban, rural and farm, in the learning of English as a second language. A sample of 20 schools in Masvingo Province participated in this study. The two socio-economic backgrounds were established as high socio-economic background (HSEB) and low socio-economic background (LSEB). Ten schools were situated in rural communities, and seven were urban. The farming communities were represented by three schools. The urban category was split as follows: five from towns and two from mining areas where the way of life approximates the urban style. In all, 120 pupils formed the sample of the study.

Purposive sampling was employed in this study. There were equal numbers of boys and girls in each sample. The socio-economic levels are relative to the Zimbabwean context. The following indicators were devised to determine socio-economic background:

- Area of residence
- Parents/guardians' educational and professional level and nature of employment
- Parental assistance with children's homework
- Languages spoken at home
- Educational facilities at home
- Types of books available to the pupil to read at home
- Access to computers, learning packages and internet
- Availability of a television set and types of programmes watched
- Student's visits to other areas with educational facilities, e.g. library or attendance of extra lessons.

The above data were gathered from a study of pupils' biographies compiled by class teachers and from interviews with pupils. Using this information, pupils' backgrounds were classified as HSEB or LSEB. Questionnaires were administered to teachers to solicit their views on the teaching and learning of English and also to establish their qualifications and their experience. Interviews were conducted with pupils in the sample.

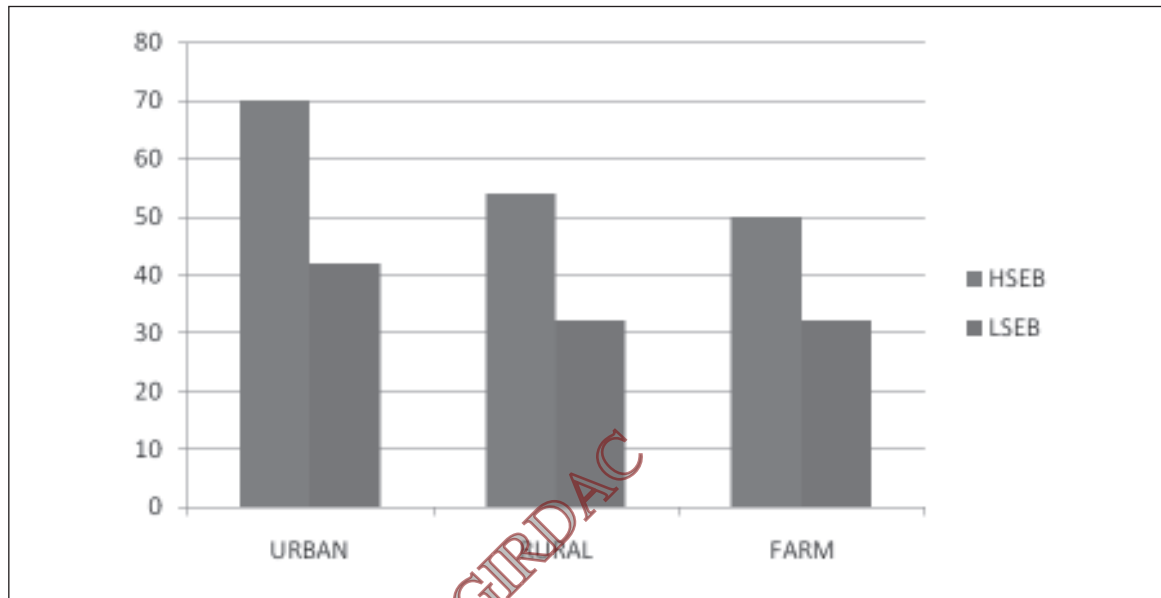
Two linguistic skills, that is, reading and writing, were tested. Although more linguistic skills might have provided more conclusive results, it was not possible to test all the skills at once. A comprehension passage from a recommended school textbook from the particular grade level was chosen to test reading skills. Two types of questions addressing simple recall and comprehension categories of Bloom's taxonomy were asked. The purpose was to assess pupils' level of comprehension of the L2 text, their pronunciation and their fluency. In order to test expressive vocabulary, punctuation and sentence construction, pupils wrote a short essay. Marks were awarded to these exercises and results from the three categories were analysed against the backdrop of the pupils' background and the context of the school, that is rural, urban or farm. The marks were compared with marks allocated to daily exercises set by the teacher to eliminate the element of chance performance by the pupils in the sample.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The average marks obtained by all students in the two broad categories of HSEB and LSEB in the three contexts of urban, rural and farm schools were statistically computed using the Excel software package to establish the mean. Table 1 below shows the various means of the two socio-economic backgrounds in each of the three contexts. The means are graphically presented in Figure 1.

Table 1: Average performance within urban, rural and farm schools

	Mean HSEB	Mean LSEB
Urban	70	42
Rural	54	32
Farm	50	32

**Figure 1:** Average performance within urban, rural and farm schools

The statistics represented in Table 1 and Fig. 1 above show that in all three categories of school context, pupils from HSEB were scoring higher marks in the L2 aspects of reading and essay writing than their counterparts from the LSEB. This suggests that socio-economic background influences pupils' performance in English language learning.

Pupils' scores in the HSEB and LSEB within the urban, rural and farm contexts were further analysed using the t-test. Table 2 below shows the values obtained.

Table 2: T-test for the difference in performance between HSEB and LSEB within categories ($\alpha = 0.05$)

	t-calculated	t-tables	Decision
Urban	4.18×10^{-9}	1.684	Fail to reject H_0
Rural	4.9×10^{-10}	1.671	Fail to reject H_0
Farm	0.005	1.746	Fail to reject H_0

In Table 2, the statistics show that the t-value calculated was far less than the t-value in the tables. This means that all the t-values fall in the acceptance region of H_0 . This suggests that in the learning of English language as an L2, differences in scores between HSEB and LSEB were not significant. This contradicts the

interpretation of the mean values obtained earlier. This contradiction could possibly be explained by the size of the sample used; the sample was small and extracted from only one region. The results further suggest that some pupils from LESB were also able to perform better.

The correlation between HSEB and LSEB based on pupils' performance in the learning of the English language was calculated for each category of school context. The following table shows the values obtained.

Table 3: Correlations within categories

	Correlation (HSEB versus LSEB)
Urban	0.34
Rural	0.16
Farm	-0.25

In the urban area, there is a weak correlation in performance between pupils from HSEB and LSEB but it is not significant. In rural settings, there is a slight positive correlation but it is also not significant. In farming communities, however, there is a negative correlation, meaning that no relationship in performance exists between HSEB and LSEB, based on pupils' performance within that context.

The correlations between categories were also calculated. For urban HSEB and rural HSEB, the value of 0,06 obtained indicates that no correlation exists. This can be attributed to different levels of resources available to urban HSEB and rural HSEB. Correlations for rural and farm contexts HSEB were also calculated. The value of 0,3 shows a correlation between HSEB in rural and HSEB in farm contexts based on pupils' performance in L2 in the two categories. Educational resources in these schools are almost similar.

Analysis of results using responses from interviews and documents

Data gathered from interviews with pupils and teachers and from teachers' record marks were analysed and compared against average scores in the HSEB and LSEB in all the school contexts. The following analysis explains the differences in scores.

In the urban areas, the high performance by pupils in the HESB category showed a close relationship with areas in which pupils resided. Children in the HSEB group from affluent residential areas scored higher on the aspects of fluency, understanding and speed than their counterparts in the same category from less affluent suburbs. When the results were compared with those of LSEB, the differences were even higher. This high performance can be attributed to the educational background of parents of the children in the HSEB category. It was established that their parents sometimes talked to their children in English. Sixty percent of the children had parents who had a minimum academic qualification of ordinary levels and who were professionals in various fields. Thirty percent of the children had at least one parents with a degree. Ten percent were not sure of their parents' educational qualifications but their way of life placed them in the HSEB.

Data gathered from interviews revealed that fluency in the L2 was also a result of the period that the pupils had been speaking the language in the home. The very fluent children started to speak the L2 at preschool and had continued to perfect their skills in the language at school. Such children also exhibited confidence in answering comprehension questions in the L2. Children in the LSEB group started learning the language when formal learning began. They also indicated that when they were at home, they hardly conversed in the L2. They were rather slow in speaking the L2 and the tendency to pronounce words syllable by syllable was common, especially in the rural and farm categories. This shows the importance of practice in effective learning of an L2.

In the essay writing test, performance was differentiated not only by socio-economic background but also by context. Pupils from HSEB were better at expression and sentence construction than those from

LSEB, confirming Bernstein's hypothesis. In both the HSEB and LSEB groups, pupils from urban areas achieved better results than those from other contexts. This observation corresponded to what was obtained in the statistical calculation of the mean and average. It was also interesting to note that within the urban category, the overall performance of pupils was affected by the degree of urbanism. In mining communities that approximated an urban lifestyle, the performance of pupils in HSEB was lower than that of pupils from the same economic background in well established urban settings. In the well established urban areas, performance showed an inclination to the location of the school, that is whether the school was in an affluent area or not. Interviews with children in these contexts found that in well established urban settings there were more educational facilities outside the family home. These included functional libraries where pupils could borrow books to read and gain access to the internet. Thus, the context factor plays a significant role in L2 learning.

This study also found that performance of pupils from HSEB was enhanced by the availability of educational facilities in the home. All pupils from HSEB indicated that they had televisions at home and that they could access various educational channels and other programmes in the L2. Sixty-seven percent had access to the internet on computers, their personal or their parents' telephones or by visiting internet cafés to chat with friends or play games. The performance of the remaining 33% could be the result of other factors. In the LSEB group, particularly in the rural and farm settings, pupils did not have access to educational facilities as in the HSEB group. In the worst cases, some of them had never set eyes on a computer but had only heard about them. Some had only seen computers in the principal's office or in pictures. As for the internet, these children confessed ignorance about its use in education.

This study also established that the performance of children in the LSEB was affected by the amount of time given to educational work at home and the availability of reading materials at home. Sixty-three percent of children hardly read at home and did not have books that matched their cognitive level; 25% had no books in the home. Twelve percent used only the books that they were allocated at school when doing homework. Most of the pupils in the rural and farm settings also pointed out that they did not have time to read because they had household chores to attend to after school. Some pupils said that the materials they had in the home were difficult to read and understand. All children in the HSEB said they had reading materials at home apart from the basic textbooks allocated by the class teacher. Also, time was made for homework. In urban areas, the performance of children from the HESB group may have been a result of the fact that their parents hired private teachers to assist them in subjects in which they had difficulties, a practice that is in use widely in urban areas of Zimbabwe and is commonly known as 'extra lessons'. Therefore, their economic status gave them the edge over those from the LSEB.

The study also established that besides socio-economic background and the context in which a school is located, other variables also influenced pupils' performance in English language learning. Teachers of classes from which the sample of the study was drawn were asked to state their academic and professional qualifications. It emerged that pupils of those teachers with degree qualifications or who had more than five years of teaching experience scored higher marks, regardless of the context or category of the school. Another variable was that of learning environment. Pupils from classes that featured a variety of learning aids, especially charts on various English language aspects, performed better than their counterparts in less well resourced classrooms. Analysis of performance according to gender also provided interesting results. In all school contexts and in both the HSEB and LSEB, it was established that girls were performing better than boys, a phenomenon which probably requires further research. Scores of pupils in the LESB were compared to the marks that they obtained in tests administered by their class teachers. The comparison showed a consistency in academic performance.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CURRICULUM DESIGNER

The analysis of results points to the notion that generally, socio-economic background and the context in which a school is located influence pupils' performance in the learning of English as a second language. This

has implications for curriculum planning in Zimbabwe in that the curriculum is centrally planned. A one-size-fits-all curriculum is planned at national level and disseminated to the user system in various school contexts, where pupils' socio-economic backgrounds are varied. In the seventh year of primary school education, pupils write a public examination that leads to secondary school education. This examination is not sensitive to the various levels of proficiency that pupils have in the second language. As a result, some pupils register dismal failures in English. In Zimbabwe, two forms of learning take place simultaneously for the L2 learner; learning the language and learning the concepts in the various academic disciplines through the medium of this language, in which they are not proficient. Whilst they are still learning the language, the expectation is that they understand it. To that effect, the onus is on the curriculum designer to devise a curriculum that is appropriate to all its consumers.

An large amount of literature attesting to the importance of the mother tongue suggests that a softer option for English language learning could be adopted in contexts where pupils have difficulties with L2 learning. Curriculum planners could concentrate on planning a curriculum that emphasises communicative skills in the lower grades and set a different examination at the end of the primary school course. However, dissenting voices question the relevance of such a curriculum that tends to be ecological. Peresuh and Masuku (1995:36) respond by agreeing with the general theory of curriculum change that, generally, curricula are accused of lagging behind the dictates of progressive discoveries made in educational research. It has to be borne in mind that the school curriculum is a contested terrain.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter has established that there is a relationship between pupils' socio-economic background and their performance in English language learning. It has also found that the context in which a school is situated affects the rate at which learners master English language concepts. The degree of urbanism and the proximity of the school to urban areas where the English language is spoken by large numbers of people also affects their performance positively.

In view of the issues raised in this study regarding the influence of socio-economic background and context in which the school is located on the learning of English as a second language, the following recommendations are made:

A dual curriculum in the primary school to cater for different levels of English language proficiency would probably solve the problem. In this study, pupils from rural and farm contexts lagged behind those in urban contexts in the mastery of L2 skills. To that end, such pupils need more time to master the skills. This is in line with Collier's (1995) recommendation that four to 12 years of second language development are needed for advantaged students to reach deep academic proficiency and compete successfully with native speakers. This suggests that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds need even more than 12 years to become proficient.

An environment conducive to the learning of the second language must prevail in the school. At home, parents must consolidate school efforts by making more books in the English language available to pupils. Parents are encouraged to enhance their children's English skills by regularly conversing with them in English to enhance fluency and confidence in conversation.

The use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction across the curriculum should be given more attention; however, problems can arise if the mother tongue does not have the vocabulary for certain concepts. This would necessitate the coining of new words, making the situation more complex. In such a proposal, the English language would be learnt for communication purposes only.

Since in some instances the statistical calculations did not match the findings from the interviews and observations, a larger sample drawn at national level might yield statistically calculated results that tally with results from interviews, supporting what the literature reveals.

Finally and most importantly, school libraries should be established, especially in rural and farming communities. In urban areas, community libraries should be stocked with books that match the various cognitive levels of learners.

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