



The Implementation of 'A' Level English Language and Communication Skills in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools: The Relevance Issue

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ABSTRACT

Implementing the curriculum has been Zimbabwe's weakest link in the whole curriculum development continuum. This case study sought to understand teachers and students' perceptions as well as challenges in the implementation of 'A' level English Language and Communication skills in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Six (6) 'A' level offering secondary schools, six (6) teachers who responded to interview questions and thirty (30) students who completed questionnaires were participants in this study. The study found that English Language and Communication skills was on the fringes of effective curriculum implementation because it is not an entry requirement at higher and tertiary institutions. This has contributed to the negative perceptions of the subject by both teachers and students. From the above, one major recommendation the study made was that English Language and Communication skills be made an entry requirement at all higher and tertiary institutions.

Keywords:

Curriculum implementation, English Language and Communication skills, Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council, Curriculum Development Unit, needs analysis

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Zimbabwean curriculum, as is the case in most African countries, is heavily in the hands of government. The vehicle Ministry of Education Sport, Arts and Culture through its service arm, the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) develops and disseminates the curriculum for implementation by teachers at various schools. The centralized curriculum system is meant to ensure curriculum equity, uniformity and access in all Zimbabwean secondary schools.

At 'O' level, students do as many as more than ten (10) and as few as five (5) subjects given the schools' infrastructural and human resources capacity. At 'A' level, students select a minimum of three (3) main subjects on the strength of their 'O' level passes from the Sciences, Arts and Commercials. However, students have an additional subject, English Language and Communication skills which is meant to be compulsory for all students primarily to anchor and support the mastery of other subjects they do and also to remain relevant in the communication world. The subject, which started off as General Paper which was borrowed from the colonial system, is meant to add value and solve problems of comprehension, expression, diction and above all presentation of ideas.

In the Zimbabwean educational system, serious academic discourse is given to examinable subjects and those that have direct bearing on the student's future job and academic prospects. Many teachers think that the best strategy is to strictly limit teaching to the required curriculum, to focus on what is needed for examinations, to choose the easiest options and not to be afraid to spoon – feed if it saves students time and effort (Petty, 2009). Further, according to Valentine (2009), teachers consciously give their peak energy and attention to examinable subjects, as a result, they often teach the less important subjects with less deliberate intentions. While English Language and Communication skills is examinable, it has fallen in this category of subjects that are less important because it does not contribute to the aggregate points scored by a student and is not considered an entry requirement in universities and other tertiary institutions.

The inclusion of any subject in the curriculum is preceded by a needs analysis which takes into account what Carl (1995) in Mufanechiya and Mufanechiya (2011) calls strategic planning to ascertain utility and relevance. The presence of each subject in the curriculum according to Petty (2009) is primarily determined by its ability to inculcate in students the knowledge to solve problems, make judgments and carry out other useful tasks. It is this productive thinking which is the main reason for education. The relevance of English Language and Communication skills in Zimbabwean secondary schools has been in doubt given teachers and students' attitude towards the subject. In most English Language and Communication skills classes, learners have failed to take responsibility for

their own learning resembling what Petty (2009) calls 'going through the motions,' that is, doing what the teacher requires, but learning only superficially. It is this attitude that teachers have shaped and influenced the hearts and minds of students by what they say, do and how they do it in English Language and Communication skills lessons. According to Wright (2005) teachers can extinguish student enthusiasm, dampen their hopes and dreams and turn them off the path of learning. This negates the professional curriculum implementation best practices.

Ideally, teachers should spend most of their time planning, teaching, marking and meeting with individual students regarding their performance. The message that goes across to students when teachers behave like this is that the subject should be taken seriously and has a valuable contribution to their future. To the contrary, when there is deliberate neglect of the subject by teachers, it is clear communication of it being less relevant. Noll (2010) says that when teachers fail to commit resources and time to the teaching of a subject, they are communicating its relative insignificance. English Language and Communication skills has been taught alongside those subjects regarded as very important and has suffered as a result. The question now is; how did English Language and Communication skills find a place in the 'A' level curriculum if it has such a diminished value? It is against this background that the research sought to find out teachers and students' perceptions towards the subject and the challenges they face in implementing the provisions of the subject.

The research was guided by the following questions:

- What are the teachers and students' perceptions towards English Language and Communication skills at 'A' level?
- What challenges do teachers and students face in the implementation of the subject?

Conceptual Framework

The concept that underpinned this study is curriculum implementation as propounded by Ornstein and Hunkins (2013) that it should be an understanding of how planned learning programmes, information and ideas see the light of day in real classroom context. It is an attempt to narrow the gap between curriculum definers (curriculum planners) and classroom practitioners so that teachers change behavior transforming beliefs and attitudes (Rogers, 2003 in Burgess, Robertson and Patterson, 2010) on the importance of English Language and Communication skills. In curriculum implementation, teachers introspect by making sense of their own existing teaching practices (Drake and Sherin, 2006) and how learners can be engaged in meaningful learning. It looks at teachers and students as partners in a rich and interactive classroom context. The implementation of English Language and Communication skills in

Zimbabwean 'A' level secondary schools has been characterized by 'doing something and anything', failing to define and justify its relevance in the curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

This case study emphasized the voices and experiences (Silverman, 2010) of teachers and students regarding their perceptions towards the implementation of English Language and Communication skills at 'A' level in Zimbabwean secondary schools. The use of qualitative paradigm enabled the researchers to obtain intimate familiarity (de Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport, 2012) with teachers and students with issues related to the teaching and learning of 'A' level English Language and Communication skills handled through interpretive processes (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). The research used open ended questionnaire to permit unlimited number of responses, adequate answers to complex issues and rich detail (de Vos et al, 2012). Interviews also complemented the open ended questionnaires through direct interchange to obtain diverse and competing ideas related to the implementation of English Language and Communication skills as a subject in the Zimbabwean secondary schools.

Sample

The research sample was of six (6) 'A' level offering secondary schools in Masvingo urban and peri – urban purposively selected because of accessibility. Involved were also thirty (30) 'A' level students randomly selected from the participating schools to respond to open – ended questionnaires. The randomness was done to reach out to both set of students that is those students who opted and opted out of the subject in order to obtain their reasons for doing so. Six (6) teachers, those who are teaching or who taught the subject were conveniently sampled to respond to interview questions.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study discovered that the education system has adequately failed to justify the continued existence of English Language and Communication skills in the 'A' level curriculum. Generally, from the interviews and questionnaires, teachers and students were in total agreement that the teaching of the subject has been chaotic characterized by inadequate planning or not at all, no time slots on the time table, inadequate work given, teachers providing feedback much later than they should in schools where it was taught and grabbing an old lesson plan than formulating a new one. Teachers interviewed and students who responded to the questionnaires regarded English Language and Communication skills as optional and hence an unwarranted burden and a hindrance to concentrating on the core subjects. One teacher remarked, *Haina basa iyi, hatidi kupedza nguva yedu neyevana tichiita zvinhu*

zvisingavapi mapoints anodiwa kumauniversity (The subject is not very useful hence we can not waste precious time on a subject that does not contribute to the students' overall points which eventually take them to university). This explains why all the six (6) schools, according to teachers and students, did not have internally set mid year and end of year examinations in English Language and Communication skills.

It is from the above perception of the subject that it was deemed 'unnecessary baggage.' It was in this spirit that two (2) schools were not even offering it, two (2) were offering it as optional and two (2) offered it as a compulsory subject though students said that there was no teaching of the subject. Informally, talking to Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZimSEC) English Language and Communication skills examiners, they showed that the number of students taking the subject each year was dwindling pointing to a number of challenges in the implementation of the subject. Instead, students in their responses to the questionnaires opted to take a fourth or fifth core subject to boost their points tally than take English Language and Communication skills. Teachers during interviews also agreed that they would rather concentrate on the core subject and only 'talk' about the subject to those who would have registered for it towards final public examinations. One teacher said about the subject, *Kupedzera energy kune zvisina basa rose* (Its sheer waste of time and energy, there are more important subjects). Furthermore, teachers also said that there was no way of enforcing students to register for the subject.

During interviews, teachers in all the sampled schools admitted that English Language and Communication skills does not have a permanent teacher. In schools (2) where it was taught, all 'A' level teachers took slots to teach the subject. The argument was that the ZimSEC examination paper catered for all disciplines. This was done regardless that the teacher had some English language teaching background. Thus teachers resented the subject taking it as an extra – burden, a fourth subject disrupting their 'core business.' *Tinopirweiko basa rakawanda sekunge pane zvatinowana* (Why this extra – burden given our poor salary and conditions of service), remarked one teacher. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that schools offer financial incentives for producing good results. For example one school offered USD20,00 for an 'A', USD10,00 for a 'B', USD5,00 for a 'C', USD3,00 for a 'D' and USD2,00 for an 'E'. Unfortunately, there was no provision for English Language and Communication skills which is also graded differently from the core subjects where 1 to 6 is regarded a pass and 7 to 9 a fail. This was also a statement by both schools and ZimSEC that the subject is not as important as others.

Teachers and students during interviews and in questionnaires respectively concurred that the challenges the subject faced were that it has not been taken seriously by school administrators as there were no budgetary provisions for the subject. Thus the subject lacked in material and human resources. Furthermore,

teachers intimated that school heads and heads of departments did not supervise the teaching of the subject instead opting to do so for the 'important subjects.' Students thus were supposed to 'fend for themselves' in this subject. The research also found that when seminars were organized by schools only the core subjects were catered for and not English Language and Communication skills because there were no teachers 'to stand up' for the subject. Even when schools pass rates are announced, teachers noted, they did not include English Language and Communication skills. To underline that the subject was precariously hanging in the 'A' level curriculum students wrote the following comments about the subject: *I do not see the reason of wasting time doing a subject that will not give me points. I am being forced by my parents to write the subject but am not interested. The subject is an unnecessary distraction to concentrating on the core subjects. The subject has never been taught with the same vigor as the core subjects showing that it is not important.* Teachers and students thus have realized that the subject is not important taking a clue from how the subject has contributed to the students' future life. The challenge now is to announce its relevance and value to both teachers and students. The situation in most secondary schools concerning English Language and Communication skills was like writing an epitaph with the inscription, 'Here lies English Language and Communication skills: Rest in pieces.' The situation is gloomy and needs urgent address and redress.

However, despite the gloom and doom surrounding the subject, those doing it applauded the important skills that it imparted especially presenting coherent arguments, sequencing and articulating ideas and improving their diction. They also heralded the subject as having a positive knock on effect on the other core subjects they were doing. *'I can now argue with confidence with fellow students'*, remarked one student. Another student also retorted, *'My comprehension skills have greatly improved not only in English Language and Communication skills but also in my other subjects.'* This is how the subject should be relevant to the students recognizing how English has become an integral part of Zimbabwean life.

CONCLUSION

There is no gold medal winning way of implementing any subject in the curriculum but the way English Language and Communication skills has been implemented has been highly unstructured and uncontrolled. The Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) together with its evaluation body ZimSEC has never genuinely taken an active interest as to why the subject's clientele base has diminished. The world after 'A' level be it at work places

or higher and tertiary institutions, English has become central and students can only effectively function when they have those skills imparted through English Language and Communication skills such as comprehension, coherence and clarity in communication. The 'A' level system in Zimbabwe is guilty of producing half – baked school graduates. It has also failed to adequately educate students and may punish them later for not being educated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

English Language and Communication skills should be accorded the status it deserves through the following three recommendations:

- The deployment of specialist English Language and Communication skills teachers at each 'A' level offering school.
- The subject getting equal treatment as other subjects in terms of slots on the time table as well as financial and material resources.
- Adding to the points tally and becoming an entry requirement at all universities and tertiary institutions.

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