

5. MULTILINGUAL MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINA AND NAMIBIA

Salomo Ndeyamunye yaNdeshimona

Abstract

This study investigated the potential benefits of adopting a multilingual medium of instruction in Namibian schools in comparison to China's multilingual educational model. In Namibia, where English is the medium of instruction from grades 4 to 12, many students face challenges because English is not their mother language. This comparative analysis aims to gauge the perspectives of both teachers and learners on the potential adoption of native languages such as Oshindonga, Otjiherero, and Silozi as instructional media in Namibian schools. Using a case study design, data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions in five Namibian schools, involving 50 learners and 10 teachers. Thematic analysis revealed broad support for introducing native languages to improve student comprehension and performance. Findings suggest that incorporating local languages into the curriculum may contribute to educational inclusivity and improved academic results, similar to China's successful multilingual education model. The study recommends that the Namibian Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture should consider adopting a multilingual approach, learning from China's experience to foster educational advancement. Further research is encouraged to explore the long-term impacts of mother tongue instruction in Namibian schools.

Keywords: multilingual education, Namibia, China, inclusive curriculum, native languages

Introduction

After Namibia gained independence in 1990, English was adopted as the official language and medium of instruction in schools (Harris, 2011; Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MoEAC], 2016). This decision was driven by the desire to unify a multilingual nation and align with global standards (Norro, 2022). However, over the years, using English as the sole medium of instruction has had unintended consequences, particularly affecting learners in grades 10, 11, and 12. To several learners, English is not their first language, and they struggle to learn complex subjects in a language in which they are not fluent. This language barrier has been linked to poor academic performance in national examinations, often creating the false perception that proficiency in English is synonymous with intelligence (Azkiyah et al., 2023). The high failure rates in these grades have raised concerns about whether English is an effective medium of instruction in a country where the majority speak indigenous African languages such as Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, and Silozi (Tötemeyer, 2010; Shikongo, 2024).

China has a multilingual curriculum, particularly in regions with large ethnic minority populations (Anand, 2022). The curriculum varies by region and the languages spoken by the local populations. While Mandarin is the official language of instruction nationwide and is used in most schools, areas with significant ethnic minority groups, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia, often incorporate local languages in education alongside Mandarin. For example, in Inner Mongolia, Mongolian is used as the medium of instruction in primary schools, while in Xinjiang, Uighur is utilised. However, Mandarin is also taught as a second language in these regions. In many of these areas, bilingual education is offered, allowing students to learn both in their native languages and in Mandarin (Anand, 2022; Wu, 2020). Moreover, the 2018 report by Human Rights Watch, "China's 'Bilingual Education'

Policy in Tibet," highlights concerns regarding the marginalisation of the Tibetan language in favour of Mandarin, particularly in Tibetan-medium schools.

This study aimed to compare the multilingual medium of instruction in China with Namibia's current monolingual approach to assess the multilingual medium of instruction on teaching and learning. The study sought to explore the perspectives of Namibian teachers and learners on adopting a similar multilingual model, where native languages are integrated into the curriculum. The objectives of the study were to assess the extent to which local languages can improve comprehension, academic performance, and inclusivity, and to draw lessons from China's experience in multilingual education. Previous research has shown that language plays a crucial role in learners' cognitive development and academic success. Cummins (as cited in Mohd Nadzir, 2022) argues that students who are taught in their mother tongue in early education perform better academically. Similarly, a study by Ball (2010) highlights the importance of linguistic diversity in achieving educational equity, particularly in multilingual societies.

The findings of this study could inform education policymakers and curriculum developers in Namibia, potentially guiding a shift towards the use of indigenous languages in classrooms to improve student outcomes and educational inclusivity.

Literature Review

The choice of language as a medium of instruction plays a crucial role in determining the success of educational systems, especially in multilingual societies like Namibia and China. After Namibia gained independence from South African rule in 1990, it adopted English as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools. This decision was largely influenced by political, economic, and social factors, as English was seen as a neutral language that could unify the country and facilitate global integration (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2019). However, more than three decades later, Namibia continues to grapple with poor educational outcomes, particularly in upper grades (grades 10, 11, and 12), where English proficiency is a significant factor affecting learners' performance (Heugh, 2012). The focus on English has unintentionally marginalised indigenous languages, potentially exacerbating educational inequalities in a country where most students speak local languages at home.

In contrast, China has embraced a multilingual approach, recognising that linguistic diversity is an asset rather than a barrier to education. Mandarin, the official language, is used as the primary medium of instruction, but local languages such as Cantonese, Tibetan, and Uyghur are incorporated in various regions to ensure that learners receive instruction in their mother tongue during the early years of education (Zhou, 2020). This bilingual or multilingual approach aligns with research by Cummins in Mohd Nadzir (2022), who emphasises that mother-tongue education enhances cognitive development and improves academic performance, especially in the foundational years.

Research has consistently shown that learners perform better when they are taught in their first language. According to Heugh (2012), the introduction of English as the sole medium of instruction in Namibian schools has contributed to significant challenges in comprehension and cognitive development, particularly for learners in rural areas where English exposure is limited. This aligns with findings from Africa at large, where countries that have adopted colonial languages as the medium of instruction often struggle with high dropout rates and poor academic achievement (Martirosyan et al., 2015; Mesthrie & Ramlal, 2017; Makoni & Pennycook, 2017; Prah, 2014). In Namibia, the overemphasis on English proficiency has led to the perception that intelligence is synonymous with fluency in English (Azkiyah et al., 2023), further disadvantaging students who excel in their native languages but struggle with English.

In China, the success of a multilingual educational model is evident in regions like Inner Mongolia and Tibet, where bilingual education programs have been implemented. According to Zhou (2020), students in these regions receive instruction in both Mandarin and their local language, allowing them to develop proficiency in both languages while retaining their cultural identity. This approach has not only improved educational outcomes but also promoted social cohesion by valuing linguistic diversity. Namibia could learn from China's experience, particularly in terms of developing policies that support the use of indigenous languages alongside English to foster better learning outcomes.

Nikièma's (2011) study titled "A first-language-first multilingual model to meet the quality imperative in formal basic education in three 'francophone' West African countries" suggested that a multilingual approach is more effective in improving academic performance, especially for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ball (2010) argues that linguistic diversity should be seen as a resource rather than a problem, and educational systems that embrace multiple languages are more likely to succeed in promoting equity and inclusivity. This is particularly relevant for Namibia, where indigenous languages such as Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, and Silozi are widely spoken but rarely used in formal education. According to the 2023 census figures by the Namibia Statistics Agency (2024), the main indigenous languages are:

- ❖ **Oshiwambo:** The most widely spoken indigenous language, spoken by 49% of the population
- ❖ **Khoekhoegowab:** Spoken by 11% of the population
- ❖ **RuKwangali:** Spoken by 9% of the population
- ❖ **Otjiherero:** Spoken by 9% of the population
- ❖ **Silozi:** Spoken by 4.71% of the population

According to the 2023 census (NSA, 2024), English is the official language of Namibia, and it is spoken by 3.4% of the population as their native language. This is a confirmation of the Namibian Constitution (1990) declaration of English as an official language, as cited in Back (2015) and Lipinge and de Galbert (2023). If the incorporation of these languages into the curriculum could be realised, Namibia could improve comprehension and engagement, particularly in subjects that are difficult to grasp in a second language like English.

The importance of adopting a mother-tongue-based multilingual education system is supported by empirical evidence from other African countries. In South Africa, for example, a study by Banda (2018) highlighted that translanguaging is a valuable pedagogical tool that leverages students' full linguistic repertoires, challenging traditional monolingual teaching methods and promoting more inclusive and effective educational practices. Similarly, research in Ethiopia and Ghana has shown that mother-tongue education in the early years leads to better retention, higher academic achievement, and improved cognitive skills (Heugh, 2012). These findings underscore the need for Namibia to reconsider its current language policy and explore the potential benefits of a multilingual educational approach. In Namibia, there were various studies that were conducted on this field, such as a study by Krishnamurthy and Aston (2015), which discovered that the adoption of English as a medium of instruction has been well adopted, such as among the Grade 10 learners in the Khomas Region. The discovery demonstrated adequate adaptation to English as the medium of instruction; however, a large number encountered persistent challenges in English as a Second Language (ESL) performance. Their findings highlighted the limitations of Namibia's monolingual language policy, which may inadequately reflect and support the country's inherently multilingual context. The authors, therefore, advocated for the integration of indigenous languages alongside English in the education system, arguing that a more inclusive linguistic approach could enhance learners' comprehension and academic achievement. Despite this vital research finding, little has been done on this topic; thus, the need to augment it and gather more data to support their work.

Despite the benefits of multilingual education, there are challenges to implementing such a system in Namibia. One major challenge is the lack of qualified teachers who are fluent in both English and indigenous languages. According to Heugh (2012), many teachers in Namibia are not adequately trained to teach in local languages, which makes it difficult to transition to a multilingual system. Additionally, there are concerns about the availability of educational materials in indigenous languages, as most textbooks and learning resources are in English. Addressing these challenges would require significant investment in teacher training and the development of local-language educational materials, but the potential benefits in terms of improved learning outcomes and social cohesion make this a worthwhile investment.

Multilingual education has the potential to bridge the gap between urban and rural learners. In Namibia, learners in urban areas are more likely to be proficient in English due to greater exposure to the language, while rural learners, who primarily speak indigenous languages, often struggle with English-based instruction (Norro, 2021). This urban-rural divide contributes to educational inequality, with rural learners consistently performing worse on national assessments. By adopting a multilingual approach, Namibia could help level the playing field and ensure that all learners, regardless of their geographical location, have an equal opportunity to succeed in school.

All in all, the adoption of a multilingual medium of instruction could significantly improve educational outcomes in Namibia, as evidenced by the positive results seen in China and other countries that have implemented similar systems. By valuing linguistic diversity and incorporating indigenous languages into the curriculum, Namibia could foster greater inclusivity and improve academic performance, particularly for learners who struggle with English. However, the success of such a policy would depend on addressing the challenges of teacher training and resource development. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of mother-tongue instruction on learners' academic and cognitive development in Namibia.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Cummins' Theory of Bilingual Education and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) as a theoretical framework. This framework posits that proficiency in a learner's first language (L1) is critical for acquiring cognitive and academic skills that can transfer to a second language (L2), such as English (Cummins, 2000, as cited in Mohd Nadzir, 2022; Khatib & Taie, 2016). The theory distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), which involve everyday language used in social interactions, and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), which refers to the ability to understand and use academic language for learning complex concepts in school.

Cummins' theory aligns well with this study's investigation into the effectiveness of a multilingual medium of instruction in Namibia. In Namibia, learners are often required to learn and process academic material in English, which is not their first language. According to Cummins, when students receive instruction in their L1 (e.g., Oshiwambo or Otjiherero), they develop CALP in their native language, which then facilitates the acquisition of CALP in English or any additional language. The absence of L1 instruction can hinder their academic success, as they may not fully develop the cognitive skills necessary to grasp academic concepts in a second language. This study's exploration of multilingual education, particularly incorporating native languages into the curriculum, is a direct application of Cummins' theory, as it advocates for L1 instruction to enhance overall academic achievement and cognitive development.

Additionally, Cummins' framework emphasises the social and educational equity that bilingual or multilingual education can promote. Recognising learners' linguistic backgrounds, Namibia could address educational disparities, especially between urban and rural students, and foster a more inclusive system. China's use of a multilingual model, which has proven successful in various regions, mirrors the principles of Cummins' theory by valuing native languages while promoting proficiency in a national or global language like Mandarin.

Research Methods

This qualitative research adopted the case study research design. Interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data from both teachers and learners from five schools in the Oshikoto region of Namibia, who were selected using a purposive sampling method. The sample consisted of 50 learners and 10 teachers. Teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule, which allowed for a comprehensive exploration of their experiences, strategies, challenges, and perceptions regarding the phenomenon of multilingual versus monolingual curricula. More to this teacher is more conversant and could provide rich data. A focus group discussion was conducted with the learners, as this method facilitates the exchange of ideas and encourages participants to build upon each other's responses. It also promoted a deeper reflection on their experiences, yielding a richer and more diverse set of insights compared to individual interviews. The inclusion criteria were that these were the participants with the required information. In total, 50 learners and 10 teachers constituted the participants.

Results and Discussion

The study revealed several key insights from both teachers and learners regarding the potential adoption of a multilingual medium of instruction in Namibian schools. The participants generally agreed that the current use of English as the sole medium of instruction poses significant challenges to learners, especially those from rural areas. "Learners in rural schools would look at you, surprised as you speak English in the classroom. Often, you will leave the class hoping you made an impact, only for you to get numerous ungraded symbols at the end," said one frustrated teacher. This was also revealed in other studies that were conducted earlier, such as Norro (2022). The data collected from interviews and focus group discussions indicated that both teachers and learners believed integrating native languages into the curriculum could improve understanding and academic performance in schools, and hopefully, the entire Namibian schools. One learner narrated that they often think well in their vernacular, yet when they translate their ideas into English, it is often very hard and causes many complications.

Teachers' Perspectives

The teacher's perspective, which emanated from the interview, highlighted that, among the teachers interviewed, 80% expressed concern about the language barrier created by English-only instruction. One teacher noted, "*Many learners struggle with basic comprehension because they do not speak English at home. This affects their ability to grasp complex subjects like science and mathematics.*" The teachers highlighted the cognitive overload faced by the learners when they are required to learn content and language simultaneously. They emphasised that using indigenous languages such as Oshiwambo and Otjiherero in early education would allow students to better understand foundational concepts before transitioning to English for advanced topics, aligning with Cummins' theory of Bilingual Education (Mohd Nadzir, 2022).

Several teachers also pointed out the cultural benefits of incorporating native languages. One teacher remarked, *"Using local languages will not only make learning easier for students but also preserve their cultural identity."* The teachers seemed to believe that by valuing indigenous languages, students would feel more included and motivated to succeed academically. This perspective resonates with Heugh's (2012) finding that multilingual education systems foster inclusivity and promote better learning outcomes in African contexts.

Learners' Perspectives

Similar observations were noted regarding the learners' perspectives towards learning in their mother tongue; this evidence came from the FGDs, which took place amongst the learners. The learners were overwhelmingly supportive of the idea of learning in their mother tongue. Most learners stated that they often feel lost during lessons because they do not fully understand English. For example, one learner commented, *"Sometimes, I understand the subject better when it's explained to me in Oshiwambo."* Another student mentioned, *"I get frustrated when I can't follow the lesson, and it makes me feel like I'm not smart."* These responses suggest that learners associate their academic struggles with the language barrier rather than their intellectual abilities. Accordingly, Ball (2010) asserts that students taught in their native language are more likely to excel academically.

However, learners also expressed a desire to be proficient in English, probably recognising its importance as a global language. One learner stated, *"I want to learn in Oshiwambo but also improve my English so I can use it later in life."* This demonstrates that while learners value mother-tongue instruction for better comprehension, they still see English as a key tool for future opportunities. This dual need for local and global language skills aligns with Zhou's (2020) findings from China, where students benefit from both mother-tongue instruction and proficiency in Mandarin.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant challenges posed by the exclusive use of English as the medium of instruction in Namibian schools. Both teachers and learners emphasised the importance of comprehension and the cognitive benefits that would come from integrating Indigenous languages into the curriculum. This aligns with Cummins' theory in Mohd Nadzir (2022), which argues that academic performance improves when students are first taught in their mother tongue. The results further support Heugh's (2012) assertion that multilingual education models in Africa contribute to better educational outcomes and social cohesion.

The study found strong support for a balanced approach where learners are taught in their native languages in the early years and gradually introduced to English as they advance. This is currently what is practised in Namibia schools, where a learner in grades 0-3 in most public schools uses their mother language as a medium of instruction; there may be variations from region to region depending on the native language spoken in that region. It is, therefore, in my view, that this strategy, which is similar to the Chinese multilingual curriculum approach (Zhou, 2020), facilitates a more seamless and successful transition to English by enabling learners to advance their academic proficiency and cognitive skills in their mother tongue.

The cultural and social benefits of a multilingual education system were also evident in the responses. Teachers and learners alike emphasised the value of preserving cultural identity through language, suggesting that incorporating Indigenous languages could foster greater engagement and motivation in students. These findings are consistent with Ball's (2010) view that mother-tongue-based education promotes educational equity and inclusivity in multilingual societies.

In the final analysis, the study found that adopting a multilingual medium of instruction in Namibia, where local languages are used alongside English, would likely improve learner comprehension, academic performance, and inclusivity. This can, in turn, ensure that our curriculum is more inclusive of all learners from all walks of life, despite their varying backgrounds, and they can all learn equally, ensuring 'inclusivity'. Both teachers and learners expressed a strong preference for this approach, drawing on the cognitive and cultural benefits of mother-tongue education. However, challenges such as teacher training and resource development need to be addressed to ensure successful implementation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the potential of adopting a multilingual medium of instruction in Namibian schools by comparing Namibia's current English-only approach with China's multilingual education system. The findings reveal that both teachers and learners in Namibia overwhelmingly support the integration of Indigenous languages, such as Oshiwambo and Otjiherero, alongside English. Participants believe that learning in their native language would improve comprehension, foster a more inclusive learning environment, and ultimately lead to better academic performance. These findings are consistent with Cummins' (2000) theory that academic success is enhanced when students are taught in their first language, particularly during their formative years.

Additionally, the study found that learners, while struggling with English, still recognise its importance for global communication and future opportunities. Thus, a balanced approach, where learners begin education in their mother tongue and gradually transition to English, may provide the best outcomes. China's success in regions where multilingual education is practised demonstrates the viability of such an approach in Namibia, where Indigenous languages are a vital part of students' cultural identity. Overall, adopting a multilingual approach can mitigate the disadvantages faced by non-native English speakers, improve social cohesion, and promote educational equity in Namibia. However, successful implementation will require addressing several challenges, including the lack of trained teachers and educational resources in local languages.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the Namibian education system in a way that will be more beneficial to the future of Namibian youths and to pave a way that will make it easier to achieve Vision 2030, and Agenda 2063, of the Africa we want of the African Union (African Union, 2015), which will enable Africa to Adapt educational programs to meet the needs of Africa's development.

- **Adopt a Multilingual Approach in Early Education:** The MoEAC should consider implementing a multilingual medium of instruction, where learners receive early education in their mother tongue before transitioning to English. This would align with Cummins' framework of cognitive development through mother-tongue instruction, thereby improving comprehension and academic success. At the moment, this is happening in our education system; however, there are a number of private schools and a few public schools that seem to have shunned this practice despite the National curriculum calling for it.
- **Teacher Training Programs:** To ensure the success of multilingual education, comprehensive teacher training programs are essential. These programs should focus on equipping teachers with the skills to teach in both indigenous languages and English. This would also involve ongoing professional development to ensure teachers can effectively handle a multilingual

curriculum. Commonly, Namibia has a shortage of teachers for some Indigenous languages such as Khoekhoegowab; therefore, training them will help us to ensure that implementing it in all schools is possible.

- **Develop Indigenous Language Educational Resources:** The Namibian government, in collaboration with education stakeholders, should invest in developing textbooks, teaching materials, and resources in indigenous languages. This shall include creating digital content in vernacular languages and creating television programs in an indigenous language that can arouse the interest of learners and help them learn with ease. Ensuring that learners have access to quality resources in their first language is crucial for the effective implementation of a multilingual system (Heugh, 2012).
- **Pilot Programs and Gradual Implementation:** A pilot program in select regions or schools could be introduced to test the efficacy of multilingual education. This approach would allow policymakers to evaluate the impact on academic performance and make adjustments before a national rollout. This can be carried out for a longer period of up to 10 years so that its impact can be evaluated throughout, until there is enough valuable data that can be relied upon to inform policymakers and curriculum developers to roll it out across the country, and the entire curriculum if it is tangible.
- **Further Research:** Additional research should be conducted to investigate the long-term effects of mother-tongue instruction on academic performance in Namibia. This could include comparative studies with countries that have successfully implemented multilingual education, such as South Africa and Ethiopia (Alexander, 2005; Ball, 2010).

Through these recommendations, Namibia could create a more inclusive and effective education system that fosters both academic success and cultural preservation, whilst upholding language heritage, encouraging multilingualism among our youths, and addressing academic shortcomings.

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