

**UNLEASHING THE CREATIVE FORCE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES:
ARGUING A CASE FOR THE USE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN THE
LEARNER DRIVER COMPETENCY TEST OFFERED BY THE MINISTRY OF
TRANSPORT AND INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE**

Green Flosie Florence

Applied Linguistics,
Midlands State University

ABSTRACT

While there are more than eleven languages mentioned in the constitution Zimbabwe, only English is used to test learner drivers' knowledge of road rules. The study interrogates the relationship between learner driver educational levels and the number of times they write the learners test. The participants all drawn from a university community wrote the test paper more than once. The study results suggest that the lower one's educational level is the higher the number of times they sit the test. The study also revealed that Learner drivers are driven into memorisation of answers to the specific tests offered at Inspection depots because they do not understand the questions asked. The researcher recommends that the learner drivers be given an opportunity to write the test in any one of the official languages mentioned in the Constitution of Zimbabwe.

© Ideal True Scholar

KEYWORDS: Reading Competency, Learner Driver, English As A Second Language (ESL), Highway Code And Indigenous Languages

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe has eleven national languages, but the most widely used are English, Shona and Ndebele, but the language of governance is English. It is the language used in conducting official government business, it is also the language used in commerce and industry. English is the language used at Vehicle Inspection Depots to test potential Learner Drivers.

The Highway Code, the Traffic Signs and Signals chart and the Learners' Green Book constitute the major documents which detail a learner driver's curriculum in Zimbabwe. Before one can be issued with a learner's licence they need to have mastered the contents of the Highway Code; the booklet that sums up the road rules and the chart which encapsulates all the road signs and signals which are used on Zimbabwean roads. The basis of the Learner driver test is the Highway Code which is in English. There are no requisite qualifications required for Learner Drivers except that one needs to be at least sixteen years of age in order to attain a class four or three license. Thus there is no educational qualification required of learner drivers. However the fact that the test is in English means that those who write that test must have attained a level of education which grants them competency in English. The learner driver competency test consists of twenty five questions which are based on an understanding of both the Highway Code and the Traffic Signs and Signals.

The Highway Code

The Highway Code (2011) has a foreword from the then Minister of Transport, Communications and Infrastructural Development a part of which reads, 'From January 2000 to December 2005, 333 860 road accidents were reported of which 16 296 people were killed and 51 770 were injured some sustaining permanent disability.'

Clearly the cost in terms of human capital is high. The same foreword indicates that, the Highway Code is meant for all classes of road users who include pedestrians, cyclists and motorists. The assumption is that the booklet is accessible to everyone in Zimbabwe and that everyone is able to read the text or as Langaan (2005:9) observes, 'glean meaning from the printed symbols and reach a meaning as that intended by the writer of the text.' The two assumptions are erroneous in that firstly the booklet is not free. It costs ten American dollars or six dollars for a photocopy from the streets. Secondly, though Zimbabwe has the highest literacy rate in Africa it is not matched by high levels of communicative competency in English as evidenced by problems experienced by students at tertiary institutions. In a study involving first semester students Mutema and Mariko (2011) discovered that though holders of "Ordinary Level" English the students experienced difficulty in understanding simple texts. Gora's study (2013) which was confined to students at Teacher Training revealed similar results; so did Ngwaru's study (2013) which is a lack of linguistic competence

among the student teachers. The point being made here is that all these are students who acquired a pass in 'Ordinary Level' English just like the university students who took part in the current study.

The Signs and Signals Chart

Signs which are used on Zimbabwean roads are universal, (refer to appendix two) and as such they do not require an English translation or interpretation. When one sees the sign of children crossing the road they would interpret it as such without necessarily being English speaking. Hence the use of an indigenous language would enhance one's appreciation of the need to exercise caution when driving or approaching such areas.

Significance

The use of English Only as the subject used for the learner driver competency test is a violation of the rights of the thirteen plus Zimbabweans. The study aims at sensitizing the policy makers on the need to allow learner drivers to take the test in the language of their choice.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to a very small area and the number of participants was small compared to the total number of those who apply for the learner driver licences. It is therefore difficult to generalise the findings of such a study. Further studies involving a larger population sample should be undertaken so as to provide a clearer picture of the situation in Zimbabwe.

Aim of Study

The aim of the study was to interrogate the relationship between number of times a learner driver writes the oral test and their reading competency of English.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed method approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because the study is concerned with the learner driver's individual perceptions about the oral test. Dornyei (2007) asserts that qualitative research is concerned with the subjective opinions of individuals because of the principle that human behaviour is based upon the meanings that attribute and bring to situations. The findings are therefore an expression of the learner driver experiences.

Study Participants

Study participants were all drawn from one driving school which is located within the grounds of one of the universities in Zimbabwe. Eighteen (18) participants were selected through purposive sampling. The participants were divided into three groups according to educational level attained.

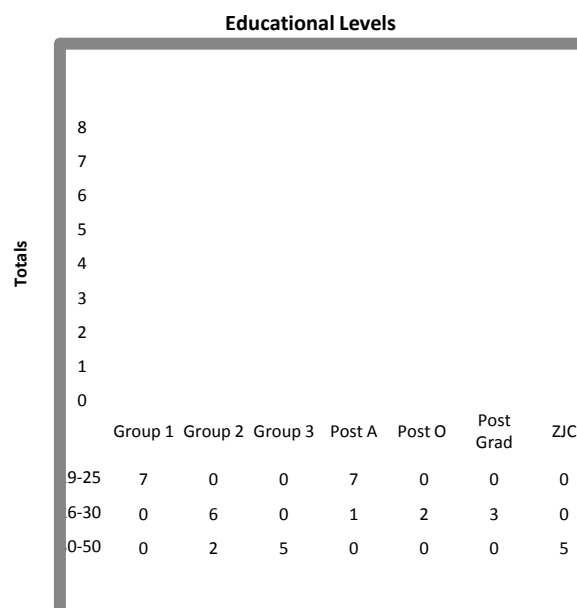


Fig 1: participants according to educational level attained

The driving school indicated that they send a monthly average of 50 learner drivers for the oral test. The participants were divided into three groups according to their educational level and age.

Data Collection

Focus Group discussions were held with individuals who had obtained their learner's licences. The groups were reacting to the following questions:

- What influenced your choice of driving school?
- How many lessons/coaching sessions did you attend before attempting the oral test
- How many times did you sit for the oral test?
- What was the most difficult part about the oral test?

RESULTS

Focus Group Findings

What influenced your choice of driving school?

Group A (19-25 years)

Members indicated that they chose the particular driving school because of its proximity to campus. The participants used their free time to get coached for the oral test. Two members of the group had been influenced by friends who went through that particular driving school and obtained their learner's licence at the first attempt.

Group B (26- 30 years)

This group was made up of members of teaching and non teaching staff. Their choice of driving school was influenced by presence of a credit facility which allows members of staff to have practical lessons on credit if they pay ten dollars for the coaching lessons

at that school. More over the idea that they get coached until they pass was an added incentive. The second factor was the proximity of the school to their place of work as staff could utilize their lunch hour to attend the coaching sessions.

Group C (31-50 years)

For this particular group school choice was influenced by proximity to the work place. An additional incentive was being coached until one passed for ten American dollars. The group also mentioned that the coach/instructor used vernacular which made it easier for them to follow instructions.

Question Two- How many coaching sessions did you have before attempting the oral test.

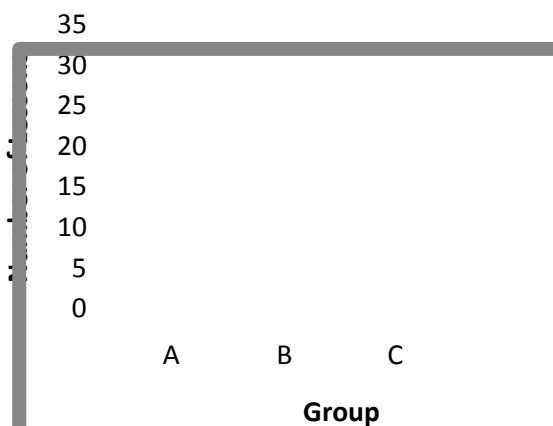


Fig. 2: The number of coaching sessions per group is shown on fig. 2

The number of coaching sessions per group is shown on fig. 2. Group C had the highest number of lessons whilst group one had the lowest. The participants were required to attend at least ten coaching sessions before attempting the oral test. The majority of group one members attended twelve lessons on average and then went for the oral test.

Question Three – How many times did you attempt the oral test

Only 15 participants provided information for this questions two from group A and one from group B chose not to. The response is presented in a table below:

Table 1: Showing number of times writing the oral test

PART	GROUP A 16-25	GROUP B 26-30	GROUP C 40+
1	1	2	2
2	2	3	3
3	2	2	3
4	3	2	3
5	2	2	3
Average Times	2	2.2	2.8
Mean Average	1.8	2.2	2.8

The coach at the driving school suggested that some participants may have gone to write the test without necessarily informing other people about it.

Question Four- What was the most difficult part about the oral test?

Group A

The participants indicated that they had ‘over prepared’ and so tended to analyse each question ‘too deeply’ so much so that they could not finish the test in the stipulated time of eight minutes. All the participants in this group wrote the oral test within the same week and so wrote either test number 8 or 11. Members indicated that they found it difficult to link a rule such as giving way to traffic from a road coming from the right when the question was in the form of a diagram (Refer to Appendix two).

Group B

The members of this group indicated that they had problems with some of the terms used in the questions. Two participants forgot the meaning of transverse and yet another could not remember what longitudinal means. The participants wrote a much wider range of the test paper; test 8, test 11, test 7 and test 10. Two in the same group wrote test 11 twice and got their learners at the third attempt. Questions which demanded an interpretation of diagrams gave the group problems; they could not see the link between the rules and the diagrammatic representations.

Group C

The participants from this group had problems with both the time and the general nature of the questions. They found the questions dealing with the regulations relating to the sequence of giving way at an uncontrolled intersection difficult. They also indicated that some terms are ‘strange’ with one querying the meaning of a ‘side car’ (refer to appendix I for sample questions.) Test 11 was written twice and test 7 once. On average the group wrote the test 2.8 times. The group found all questions equally challenging whether they had diagrams or not.

DISCUSSION

All participants in this study were drawn from a university community and one would assume that there is generally a higher level of reading competency within this community compared to others around. Yet the results seem to indicate that the participants found the test difficult. The first group of undergraduates all has O level English and so should be able to tackle the learners’ test without difficulty. Yet even for this group only 6.6% wrote the test once with the rest writing it at least twice. The second group also seems to have found the test challenging as the participants in this group on average wrote the test twice. The third group made up of mostly ZJC holders had the highest average in terms of writing the test at 2.8.

The coaches and learner drivers in the three groups

were using code switching/Translanguaging during their coaching sessions. The coach would for instance explain the rule 'never turn in front of oncoming traffic' using L1 and then the learner driver would be asked to identify the car which would be breaking the law in terms of this rule. The challenge for some participants was that they would be unable to understand the demands of the question. In other words the participants were not able to comprehend the demands of the question.

Driving schools put a lot into getting learner drivers passing their oral test because then they are assured of more business when the learners come back to prepare for the road test. The coaches usually ask the learner driver to come back and book driving lessons immediately after acquiring the learner's licence. There are two reasons for this requirement. The first is so that the coach finds out which test the learner drivers sat for so that they coach those who would be going in either that afternoon or the next morning. The researcher learnt that it is not unusual for the same test to be written twice in the same day; morning and afternoon or even for the same test to be written more than four times in the same week. By merely reproducing question one and two of a particular test coaches are able to ascertain what test number it is.

The second reason is to ensure that the driving school does not lose its clientele to other schools by promising a discount for the first five or even ten lessons after acquiring the learners' licence. Learner drivers are usually drawn to driving schools which have a high road test pass rate. Instructors therefore strive to ensure that they develop a reputation of producing 'passes'.

CONCLUSION

The continued use of English in conducting learner driver tests encourages the learner drivers to memorise answers to specific questions without understanding what the questions want. Eventually individuals with very little understanding of the road rules go on to become drivers. The continued use of English denies the average Zimbabwean of acquiring a learner driver's licence legitimately. This is a violation of individual rights and a negation of the spirit of ZIM ASSET. Driver licensing in the said document falls under Sector Key Result Area: Road Safety and Security and Security Management. *The sector outcomes are given as improved co-ordination of road agencies and law enforcement resulting in increased revenue inflows through ZIMRA. The sector outputs are; vehicle registration, driver licensing, vehicle overload fees and vehicle operator and route authorities automated* (2013p99).

The document omits to state the strategies to be used to encourage driver licensing neither is there mention

of an expansion of the languages to be used in the testing of learner drivers.

While the study participants constitute a small percentage of the total number of people who write the learners' test it does indicate that those who write the test do not always understand the questions and or the preferred answers. Furthermore there is a need for further research in this area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Highway Code should be made accessible to all Zimbabweans; this is only possible if it is translated into all the indigenous languages.
- That the Ministry of Transport avails learner drivers an opportunity to write the Learners' test in any of the indigenous languages; i.e. be given a choice.
- The Ministry of Transport collaborates with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to make the Highway Code and Road safety lessons be part of the life skills curriculum.
- That the initiative taken in Matebeleland South Region to enable Ordinary level students to acquire driving licences as part of their school curriculum be emulated in all the other regions in Zimbabwe.
- That the Ministry concerned extends the life of the learner drivers' licence to two years as the current one year period is very short for most learners due to the very few Vehicle Inspection Depots which are found in Zimbabwe.

REFERENCES

- Dorneyi,Z.(2006) Research Methods in Applied Linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Ellis, R.(1997) Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gora, R. B. (2013) Continuity and Change: Towards a national language policy for Education in Zimbabwe. Available on <http://www.onlineresearchjournals.org/JSS.retrieve14Jan2015>
- Langan,J.(2005) College Writing Skills.5th ed. New York: McGraw Hills.
- Mutema, F. and Mariko, I (2012) Common Errors in Second Language (L2) Speaker's written texts. A case of First year First Semester (L1:S1) Arts students at Midlands State University: An Error Analysis Approach in Modern Journal of Applied Linguistics,2012,Vol 4 Issue 4 p218 Accession#98788016.

Ngwaru (2013) at <http://www.journals.org/GJER/GJERPdf/2013/Sept/031813530Ngwarupdf> Greener Journal of Educational Research ISSN 2276-7789 Vol3 (7) pp310-317 September 2013. Retrieved 14 January 2015.

The Government of Zimbabwe. (2013) ZIM ASSET. Harare: ZUNDAF. Accessed, 28 January 2014.

Ministry of Transport and Infrastructural Development (2010) The Highway Code. Harare: Government Printers.

Appendix One

Sample Questions

1 Q- What warning sign must be placed on the road when a heavy vehicle is stationary on a road at night?

A- If the speed limit on that section of the road is over 70km per hour a red reflective triangular sign must be placed behind such vehicle at a distance of between 30m and 50m.

2 Q- At what distance should you follow the vehicle ahead of you?

A- A gap equal to at least the length of my vehicle should be allowed in respect of each 15km per hour at which my vehicle is travelling. I will increase the gap in bad light and on wet or dusty roads.

3 Q- In the case of a motor vehicle or motor cycle and side car, what are the requirements with regard to the carriage of passengers?

A- (i) On a solo motor cycle only one passenger may be carried on a proper pillion seat and foot-rests must be provided.

(ii) On a combination no passenger shall sit anywhere except in the side car or on the proper pillion seat.

4 Q- What are your responsibilities towards pedestrians when turning to the left or right at a robot controlled intersection?

A- I must give special consideration to any pedestrian on any pedestrian crossing over which I intend to pass, after entering the intersection, and shall stop my vehicle if necessary.

5 Q- What do the following road markings running parallel to the road indicate?

(i) An unbroken white line?

(ii) An unbroken white line with a broken white line on its left hand side?

(iii) An unbroken white line with a broken line on its right hand side?

(iv) A double unbroken white line?

(v) A broken yellow line along the left hand side?

A (i) That my vehicle may not be driven so as to cross or straddle the white line.

(ii) That my vehicle may cross both lines if it is safe to do so.

(iii) That my vehicle may not be driven so as to cross or straddle either line.

(iv) That no vehicle may be driven on the right hand side of these lines.

(v) No motor vehicle shall cross or straddle such a line.

Appendix Two

Signs and Signals



Fig 1
School children crossing.



Fig 2
Slippery road ahead



Fig 3
Give way sign

The Signs and Signals Chart is part of the learner driver Curriculum in Zimbabwe.