



The discrepancies between ICT policy and ICT usage in English second language teaching and learning in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools

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Abstract

To move with the technologically advancing times, the Government of Zimbabwe in 2016 proposed an information and communication technology (ICT) policy for implementation in educational institutions. This policy demanded that ICTs be integrated into teaching and learning for a higher quality of education. However, a noteworthy point is that this policy is largely a theoretical document with no clear indications of how the mandate could be put into practice, especially in secondary schools located in rural areas where ICT infrastructure limitation is a real challenge. That this policy applies a blanket ICT integration ideology that fails to consider disparities in advantage between rural and urban schools creates a fundamental problem about the extent to which the policy can achieve holistic success. In this article, extracted from a doctoral study, we question the extent of the success of the ICT policy implementation in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe, particularly with reference to English second language (ESL) teaching and learning. Drawing on findings from a multiple case study research project that utilised interviews and focus group discussions to collect qualitative data, we argue that there are salient discrepancies between the ideologies that the Zimbabwean national ICT policy panders and the realities that ESL teachers and learners face on the ground about ICT usage.

Keywords: connectivism, ESL teaching and learning, ICT policy, ICT usage, Zimbabwean rural secondary schools

Introduction

After gaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe needed to implement certain educational reforms to fulfil the demands of its developing economy and educational system under the new dispensation. The main reforms that were put in place following independence addressed historical quantitative disparities and improved access to education for Black Zimbabweans (Kanyongo, 2005). However, as time went on, it became clear that the nation needed to further advance economically, socially, and technologically to keep up with the rapidly changing world and the advent of a fiercely competitive global economy. In particular, to move with the technologically changing environment, the government proposed a policy through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) in 2005, which advocated for the integration of information communication technology (ICT) into teaching and learning at educational institutions (Isaacs, 2007). This national ICT policy came after several sectoral policies, “including Vision 2020, the national science and technology policy adopted in 2002, and the Nziramasanga Education Commission Report which in 1999 recommended the promotion of the educational use of computers for teaching and learning in educational institutions” (Isaacs, 2007, p. 4).

The 2005 national ICT policy aimed at building Zimbabwe’s technological capabilities through educational reforms geared at the innovative use of ICTs. Isaacs (2007, p. 4) noted that the policy’s vision was “to transform Zimbabwe into a knowledge-based society by 2020,” while its mission was “to accelerate the development and application of ICTs in support of economic growth and development.” In addition, the objectives were “to promote the development of ICT infrastructure, provide education and training programmes to produce knowledge workers and qualified human resources, to establish relevant structures and institutional mechanisms to promote ICTs, and to encourage equitable access to ICTs across genders and to youth” (Isaacs, 2007, pp. 4–5). In line with its vision, mission, and objectives, the 2005 national ICT policy was adopted and implemented in public secondary schools across Zimbabwe with the goal of promoting inclusive education for all (Mathende & Beach, 2022).

However, even with the reported increase in ICT use in education, research indicated that most regions of the nation still had limited and uneven technology integration and utility in schools (Gomba, 2016; World Bank, 2016). This then created a need for the government to review the 2005 national ICT policy. As a result of the review, a second ICT policy was adopted in 2016. Its vision was to create “a knowledge-based society with ubiquitous connectivity by 2020” while its mission was to “exploit the potential of ICTs for sustainable socio-economic development in Zimbabwe” (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016a, p. 11). The 2016 national ICT policy, similar to its predecessor, promoted the use of ICT in education, emphasising the improvement of pedagogical methods to ensure high quality instruction throughout the Zimbabwean school curriculum (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016a). The policy mandated educational institutions to use ICTs in their pedagogical activities in ways that will equip learners to use technology efficiently in navigating a tech-driven global economy (Chapfika, 2023; Government of Zimbabwe, 2018; Manhivi, 2019).

ICTs encompass a broad spectrum of technologies and applications utilising various hardware, software, and telecommunications network types (Goodwin et al., 2015). They include computers, email, and the internet—all used in the generation and conveyance of information from one place to the other (Conole & Dyke, 2004). In its definition of ICTs, the 2016 national ICT policy of Zimbabwe refers to “the role of unified communications and the integration of telecommunications (telephone lines and wireless signals), computers as well as necessary enterprise software, middleware, storage, and audio-visual systems, which enable users to access, store, transmit, and manipulate information” (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016a, p. 11).

These technological tools all have valuable roles they play in the transfer, storage, or use of information in achieving set educational tasks (Ndlovu & Moll, 2016). The vision of the Zimbabwe 2016 national ICT policy was for schools “to use ICT as an enabler for education in order to create, promote and sustain the development of a knowledgeable, innovative and creative society which ultimately supports the national agenda of attaining a knowledge-based society” (Dzinotyiweyi & Taddese, 2020, p. 7). However, a major problem noted here is that the policy did not specify a plan of action for its implementation in schools. While it mandated “the deployment and exploitation of ICTs in the educational system from primary school upwards” (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016a, p. 17), it did not have explicit guidelines on how ICTs are to be deployed and exploited in practice. The policy’s secondary goal in the field of education was to identify strategies for increasing e-learning and the practical application of e-learning resources in the whole of Zimbabwe (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016a). However, the policy did not go into detail on how this will be put into practice. The disjuncture between policy goals and implementation plans is what inspired this study, which aimed at investigating ICT usage in English second language (ESL) teaching and learning in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools.

In Zimbabwean secondary schools, ESL is a compulsory subject for O-level learners. It serves a utilitarian function in that it builds communicative competence that learners will need in higher education and the world of work, both dominated by English. If the national ICT policy is to achieve its vision of creating a knowledge-based society, then this is one subject in which one should see ICTs empowering learners to be knowledge producers. An obvious hypothesis is that if ICTs are implemented in the teaching and learning of ESL, then ESL learners will become knowledgeable in using the English language for personal advancement and societal development. Yet, what is missing here is the understanding that policy cannot be applied to all contexts uniformly because contexts differ in advantages and disadvantages. Rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe operate in a context marked by invisibility, insufficiency, and socioeconomic deprivations (Konyana & Konyana, 2013; Manhibi, 2019). To what extent, then, can the national ICT policy be implemented in this context? To what extent can it function as an enabler in the teaching and learning of ESL in rural secondary schools?

This was a doctoral research project undertaken at the University of the Witwatersrand for a doctorate in Education, with specialisation in languages, literacies, and literatures

(Mukomana, 2025). This article has been extracted from the bigger project to look specifically at the limitations of policy itself in the teaching and learning of ESL in rural Zimbabwean secondary schools. The key research question answered in this article is: “What are the limitations of the national ICT policy in the teaching and learning of ESL in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools?” In asking this question, the study hoped to collect data that will determine if there was alignment between what government policy said about ICT usage in education, and what ESL teachers and learners were able to do with ICTs in rural classrooms. The findings enable an assessment of the extent to which the national ICT policy has been operationalised in the teaching and learning of ESL in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

ICT usage in English language education

The introduction of ICT usage in English language teaching, generally, has brought about the promise of revolutionising the classroom experience for teachers and learners. The existing literature offers an abundance of positive views about the utilisation of ICTs in English language teaching and learning. For example, ICTs have been said to enhance English language learning by encouraging regular practice with speaking, listening, reading, and writing, which are the four core skills in language education (Tessema, 2024). The use of multimedia technology in English language teaching is said to significantly contribute to learners’ acquisition of these skills because regular interactions with multimedia tools improves learners’ fluency of language use in verbal and written communication (Alobaid, 2020; Jose & Raja, 2011). In a study on the effectiveness of technology use in foreign language teaching and learning, Golonka et al. (2014) found that technological tools such as interactive white boards, electronic dictionaries, smartphones, iPads, and iPods improved both the quality and quantity of English foreign language learning, suggesting that language production is boosted when learners utilise ICTs. Similarly, a global study on the relationship between computer-assisted language learning and second language acquisition demonstrated that learners who engaged in computer-based ESL learning outperformed learners who simply participated in traditional learning situations (Plonsky & Ziegler, 2016). A study in India indicated that the use of blogs helped to improve the vocabulary of ESL learners (Aravind & Bhuvaneshwari, 2022). These examples show that ICT usage has benefits in English language teaching and learning. This then makes it necessary to investigate how the Zimbabwe national ICT policy is working out in ESL teaching and learning in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools.

The idea that social contact between teachers and learners, as well as between learners, is crucial for the growth of communicative abilities throughout language learning is supported by literature on the use of ICTs for language acquisition (Brandl, 2005). Similarly, ICT tools such as Moodle can be used for evaluation and feedback, online content creation, and collaborative learning (Gamage et al., 2022). Given that Moodle can be used as a platform for conversation and debates with learners, it emphasises collaboration and engagement. Gamage et al. further noted that workshops, quizzes, videos, e-portfolios, and virtual tours can easily be embedded into Moodle, thereby enhancing student interactions with each other and with

the teacher as well as building communicative competence. However, the picture is not all rosy.

While there is a wealth of research on the benefits of ICT usage in ESL teaching and learning in general, there is not enough on how learners specifically understand the “how” of utilising ICTs in the learning of ESL (De Carvalho et al., 2011). Golonka et al. (2014, p. 92) noted that although ESL learners enjoy using technology in learning, there is not enough evidence on how ICTs “actually increase students’ learning.” Even Moodle is not without its disadvantages, as a study by Alhothli (2015) found; learners thought Moodle was an odd way to study English because they were accustomed to a more hands-on, in-person approach. In addition, teachers’ positive beliefs about the advantages of ICTs in English language teaching do not always translate into their practice, as a study in Ethiopia showed; many rarely used these technologies in their teaching (Tessema, 2024). It has also been noted in Malaysian secondary schools that although teaching ESL writing with ICTs has the advantage of encouraging learner independence and self-discovery skills, it also creates problems of difficult class control, learner distraction, and the improper use of SMS language in formal writing (Yunus et al., 2013). From these examples, it is evident that while the positive value of utilising technological tools in ESL teaching and learning is dominant in the literature, some negative experiences have also been noted. This study contributes to understandings of the negative experiences of ICT integration in English language education by looking specifically at the ways in which policy limitations impact ICT implementation in ESL teaching and learning in rural Zimbabwean educational settings. The theory of connectivism offered an appropriate theoretical lens for unpacking the study’s findings.

Connectivism

Connectivism is a learning theory that emphasises ICT incorporation into teaching and learning. It holds the view that knowledge is socially created and that learning takes place within several networks, with the learner playing a central role in the process of producing new knowledge (Siemens, 2005). In other words, learning is the process of creating and navigating a network of connections through which knowledge is dispersed (Hendricks, 2019). From this perspective, learners no longer possess the necessary experience and learning capacity to function alone; instead, they become competent through the establishment of networks (Siemens, 2005). The core of connectivism, therefore, is the concept of connection and belonging to a network. Connectivism represents a shift from conventional theories of learning, such as behaviourism and constructivism, toward an innovative approach to learning via online means and methods, databases, and networks on various virtual learning environments (Hendricks, 2019; Siemens, 2006). By implication, it encourages the utilisation of technological tools in the teaching and learning of ESL. This theory is applied in interpreting the findings of this study because of its relevance to ICT usage in teaching and learning.

Methodology

The research followed a qualitative methodology in which data to answer the research question were collected using narratives rather than statistics (Bryman, 2016). The research paradigm that guided the investigation was interpretivism, which does not aim to identify cause-and-effect relationships, nor to establish universal truths about the world, but rather to understand the social world through the interactions of humans with the world (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). In line with the qualitative methodology, the interpretivist paradigm focuses on thoroughly examining a limited number of cases using verbal descriptions and explanations that explicitly interpret the meanings and purposes of human acts (Nudzor, 2009; Scotland, 2012). This paradigm lends itself to the case study research design, which is an intensive longitudinal study of a phenomenon at one or more research sites to understand its dynamism and complexity (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Because the study centred on rural secondary schools, multiple sites were chosen to give representativeness to the data.

Study context and sample

As earlier noted, English is a compulsory subject in Zimbabwean secondary schools. There are two levels of secondary education in Zimbabwe: lower secondary and upper secondary. The Ordinary Level Certificate is the culmination of the 4-year lower secondary school cycle, which consists of Forms 1 to 4. The Ordinary Level or O-level class is another name for the Form 4 class. Learners have two alternatives after completing their four years of lower secondary schooling: they can enrol in upper secondary level education (Forms 5 to 6) for an additional two years of schooling which will give them an Advanced Level Certificate (also known as A-levels), or they can enrol in tertiary education institutions that do not require A-levels as a prerequisite for admission, such as teacher colleges and polytechnic colleges. Regarding qualification equivalence, Zimbabwe employs Form 6 as the final secondary school departure qualification that leads learners to higher education.

A secondary school is classified as a rural secondary school if it is not one of the major metropolitan schools. Because Zimbabwe's rural areas are distant and underdeveloped, many of its secondary schools are similarly underdeveloped and impoverished. The following traits of rural secondary schools were listed by Seroto (2004): a dearth of infrastructural resources, packed classrooms, and abject poverty. These factors pose a particular combination of challenges for learners attending rural schools to receive quality education (Gomba, 2016). The most basic facilities for instruction and learning are absent from these remote secondary schools. There is a poor transport network to the rural schools because the majority of the roads there are in a dilapidated condition. Because most rural learners have low socioeconomic backgrounds, this inevitably contributes to limited access to education of high quality in secondary schools in rural locations (Konyana & Konyana, 2013; Manhivi, 2019). The disadvantaged position of the schools, teachers, and learners in rural areas begs the question of how government authorities envisaged the implementation of the national ICT policy in ESL education in rural contexts.

This study therefore aimed to investigate the limitations of the ICT policy for rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The study's population of interest consisted of 720 O-level learners and 24 ESL teachers from 18 secondary schools in the rural Bubi District of Zimbabwe's Matabeleland North Province. Of the 18 secondary schools, three rural schools were chosen using a purposive sampling approach. The schools were conveniently sampled because of their proximity to one another, their ease of access by the primary researcher, and the familiarity of their governance structures (for obtaining permissions) as the primary researcher had previously worked in this area. From the three selected schools, a sample of three O-level ESL teachers (two women and one man) was included in the investigation because these were the only ESL O-level teachers available. Each of the schools selected had an ESL O-level class consisting of 40 learners, which meant that 120 learners (63 females and 57 males) made up the sample of learners for this study. While all 120 learners and three teachers completed semi-structured questionnaires, only the three teachers and 30 learners participated in interviews and focus group discussions.

Data collection tools

Two main instruments were used to collect data in this study: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. All interviews and focus group discussions took place in March–April 2023 on the school premises at times pre-arranged with interviewees.

Semi-structured interviews

The face-to-face interview approach was used for the teacher interviews so that participants' emotions could be captured along with their views about ICT integration in ESL classrooms. The three teachers were interviewed individually in their respective schools, School A, School B, and School C. The interviews were semi-structured, in which case the researcher had a set of prepared questions to ask the participants, but there was also room to modify or rephrase the questions to allow for more substantive responses from the participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The questions posed to the teachers sought to find out from them how they used ICTs to teach English in their O-level classes and the challenges they faced. Two of the questions posed to the teachers were: "How do you use ICTs to cater for learners' learning needs?" and "What major challenges are you faced with in using ICTs to teach English as a second language?" The teachers' responses provided insights into the extent to which they had been able to implement the mandate of the national ICT policy to integrate ICT into teaching and learning.

Focus group discussions

With the focus group discussions, data was collected from 30 O-level learners (10 learners from each of the three selected schools). The focus group discussions were also conducted face-to-face, with one focus group discussion in each school. Two of the questions posed to learners during the focus group discussions were: "What factors inhibit the use of ICTs in the teaching and learning of English as a second language at your school?" and "What is your school policy in terms of the use of ICTs in your learning of English as a second language?"

With these questions, the focus group discussions generated many ideas that helped in determining the extent to which policy and practice matched in the use of ICTs in ESL education in rural schools.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed following the thematic content analysis approach, which allows for inductive identification of patterns in the data (Creswell, 2012). Interview recordings were regularly played shortly after the interviews in order to convert the data into text. The transcriptions of both sets of interviews then formed the basis for the thematic content analysis that followed. Codes were assigned to the data after several readings of the transcripts. The coding was done manually; no software was utilised. The codes were then used to create categories or themes that spoke directly to the study's research question.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to all ethical norms as stipulated by the University of the Witwatersrand, with an ethics clearance granted on 20 October 2022 (Protocol Number H22/08/22). Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from participating in the study whenever they felt uncomfortable. All participants of 18 years and older signed written consent forms while participants younger than 18 provided assent forms along with signed consent forms from their guardians. To comply with the ethical code of anonymity, all participants in the study are represented by fictional names in this article. For the focus group discussions, the 10 learners from one of the selected rural schools who made up Group A are coded as GA1 to GA10. The 10 learners from the second school, who made up Group B, are coded as GB1 to GB10. Lastly, the 10 learners from the third school, who made up Group C, are coded as GC1 to GC10. The three teachers are given the labels TA, TB, and TC to indicate their affiliations to School A, School B, and School C, respectively. TA, TB, and TC stand for Teacher A, Teacher B, and Teacher C, correspondingly.

Findings

As stated in the introduction, in this article we seek to answer the research question: "What are the limitations of the national ICT policy in the teaching and learning of ESL in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools?" The thematic content analysis of the teacher interviews and learner focus group discussions yielded the major finding that there were gaps and weaknesses with the ICT policy that hindered the successful implementation of ICTs in ESL teaching and learning in rural secondary schools. Under this major theme, three subthemes were identified: policy without localised frameworks for implementation, policy implementation without adequate infrastructure, and policy implementation without professional training.

Policy without localised frameworks for implementation

Under this subtheme, we noted from the data several problems around the implementation of the national ICT policy. First, there was an evident disjuncture between policy stipulations at

national level and teachers and learners' ability to execute policy within their local contexts. For example, one of the policy's goals was to "promote e-learning and use of e-learning materials" in Zimbabwean schools through the provision of ICTs (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016a, p. 31), yet it was not clear how exactly the ICT tools were to be used for e-learning purposes. Participants felt that the MoPSE gave no specific guidelines to assist teachers on how to integrate technology into their ESL lessons to promote e-learning:

We do not have proper guidelines within our schools on how we should make use of ICTs in ESL. The School itself has no ICT policy. (TA)

This statement indicates that while the national ICT policy existed, it had not been translated into proper guidelines to help ESL teachers in this rural secondary school to integrate ICTs into their teaching. The school did not have a localised ICT policy that catered for its specific contextual needs. This gap in the national ICT policy was a major challenge to teachers' integrating technological tools into their teaching of ESL. It gives rise to the notion that schools should be making the decisions on how to employ ICTs in teaching and learning, leaving them free to come up with their own home-based frameworks.

TA further noted that it was impossible to support ESL teachers in implementing ICTs in their classrooms without a locally relevant, institution-based ICT policy:

Administrators cannot hold anyone accountable for failing to integrate ICTs since government laws do not state how teacher educators should utilise ICTs during instruction. Therefore, there is nothing compelling about the usage of ICTs. Technology is merely an add-on that the user can adopt as they see fit.

As shown in this quotation, TA felt that there was no compelling legislature requiring teachers to use ICTs in a specified way. This is because the country's ICT policy had not been translated into the teachers' local context to enable them use it appropriately and effectively. Teachers who were incorporating the use of ICTs in lesson delivery could be said to do so out of their own freewill, not out of compulsion. This practically means that the national ICT policy was invisible in this context—an ironic outcome of the policy formulation.

Like TA, TB and TC indicated that there were no explicit policy instructions for ICT adoption in their schools, or instructions specifying how technology should be used for ESL teaching. They noted the necessity of having localised ICT policy frameworks to direct their work and the adverse consequences on teaching and learning where such frameworks were not in place.

The school ICT policy is necessary within our school as it will provide guidance on how we implement the utilisation of ICTs that are available here. (TB)

Without a school ICT policy, it becomes very difficult to put the learning process into practice. (TC)

From the teachers' statements above, the absence of school-based ICT policy frameworks was an impediment to the implementation of the national ICT policy, thereby impacting negatively on the quality of teaching and learning that took place in ESL classrooms.

The teacher participants observed that the value of the national ICT policy was not reflected in their own schools because none of the schools had an internal ICT learning policy. TB said she had not seen any ICT policy at her school:

I have heard there is a policy, but I haven't seen or touched the document.

TB's statement indicates that she was not familiar with an ICT policy at her school, if such a policy even existed. That the government of Zimbabwe expected teachers to incorporate technological resources into ESL education without teachers having access to the policy document shows the limitations of the national vision regarding ICT integration in rural secondary schools. It is ironic that the national policy was not readily available to the very same teachers who had to implement it. This irony is emblematic of the discrepancy between policy and practice.

Learner participants also voiced concerns that there was no baseline research conducted to understand the types of resources available in their schools, the capabilities of their teachers, parents, and community leaders as key stakeholders, as well as the school surroundings before the ICT policy was introduced in their school. The responses below from learner participants show that they expected expert consultation and engagement with teachers prior to the ICT policy implementation in schools:

The introduction of ICT in schools is not being carried out in a positive manner. I believe the MoPSE can do better if they can truly interact with those working in the schools and get their input on how to proceed. As it is, our school has no clear ICT policy. It's difficult to know which rules to follow. Today our teacher needs us to use our cellphones to learn, the next day one is punished for holding a cellphone. (GC5)

There is need for appropriate discussions and consultations to take place prior to the actual implementation of some of these changes and the better they would be to effect. (GA4)

These learners' responses echo those of the teachers that the government did not do enough to prepare teachers and learners to implement ICTs in ESL classrooms. Learner GC5 thought that the deployment of ICTs in schools was inappropriately done because the MoPSE had failed to communicate with the right parties in the many education disciplines that were connected to the school systems as a whole. Likewise, learner GA4 noted that appropriate consultations with people on the ground were necessary for the ICT implementation plan to be effective in schools. The opinions and contributions of people other than legislators and policy makers were crucial in as far as the integration of technological tools in schools was concerned, according to these learners. The learner participants voiced their displeasure with the government's strategy of bringing about significant changes in secondary schools without

first soliciting input from the school stakeholders. Particularly, they were unhappy with the lack of a proper and clear ICT school policy for teachers and parents involved in the implementation stages of ICT use in ESL instruction. Regretfully, teachers were typically left to respond to changes and the difficulties brought about by these changes, rather than being allowed to participate in the creation of new policies or innovations used in schools. The kind of top-down approach to ICT policy implementation in Zimbabwean higher education noted by Dube and Scott (2016) was also evident in the case of these rural schools. As the learners' responses above suggest, teachers were made outsiders to the very processes that required them to be inside participants. Moreover, the absence of proper consultations prior to the implementation of the national ICT policy in schools resulted in situations where rules about the use of cellphones in class were inconsistent, contradictory, and confusing to learners.

Policy implementation without adequate infrastructure

The Zimbabwe national ICT policy states:

This policy aims to provide connectivity in all schools further bridging the urban-rural digital divide, and enhancing teaching and learning through the use of technology tools and promoting universal computer literacy in Zimbabwe's schools. (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016a, p. 31)

This policy ideal is contrasted by the reality of ICT infrastructure shortage in rural schools. It has been found in South Africa that one of the primary hurdles to ICT use in education is inadequate technology-related infrastructure in rural secondary schools (Masango et al., 2020). This study, which examined ESL classes, also found that Zimbabwean secondary schools in rural areas lacked adequate ICT infrastructure, even though policy required them to implement ICTs in teaching and learning. The teacher participants made the following observations regarding infrastructure:

We're not sure what they expect us to do in these kinds of situations. Given that schools lack the required infrastructure, how can they introduce e-learning before securing adequate infrastructure? (TA)

Teaching ICT in schools without ICT infrastructure is like having a white elephant in your room because the government cannot expect teachers to always pull out their meagre salary resources to sustain teaching processes. (TB)

It is difficult for the parents to purchase computers for the school. These are the computers and the supporting systems for the computer labs where they will be located, as the computers won't be safe and secure if the infrastructure isn't sufficient. (TC)

The above statements point to a deficiency of facilities, such as computer laboratories, to support ICT activities in the rural secondary schools involved in this study. TA rhetorically questioned what government authorities expected teachers to do when they themselves had

failed to avail rural teachers with the requisite ICT infrastructure to deliver ICT-inclusive lessons. TB used the idiom of a “white elephant” to convey the preposterousness of delivering ICT-oriented instructional activity without appropriately constructed ICT infrastructure. Lastly, TC noted that because there was insufficient infrastructure in the form of computer laboratories, donating computers to the school by parents and other community stakeholders would not make sense since the computers would not be safely stored. These comments all point to the reality that infrastructure shortage was an obstacle to ICT implementation in rural ESL classrooms. This finding gives credibility to the view that a primary barrier to technology integration in rural schools is lack of ICT infrastructure (Masango et al., 2020). More significantly, however, we note here a discrepancy between the policy mandate for schools to integrate ICTs into teaching and learning, and infrastructure limitations to implementing the mandate.

Without spacious and well-ventilated structures set up to store technological equipment and to offer a conducive environment that is appropriate for teaching with ICTs, it is unlikely that ICTs will influence ESL education to the required standards set out in policy. An objective that was listed in the Zim-ASSET economic vision was that of making Zimbabwe “computer literate by promoting all district education and ICT infrastructure by 2018” (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013, p. 8). This remains a dream in the pipeline because respondents to this study stated that their schools were still lacking the ICT-focused infrastructure as outlined in the Zim-ASSET national plan for 2013–2018.

Policy implementation without professional training

While the national ICT policy stated that the Zimbabwean government aimed to “provide equitable access to ICT enabled education and training in all parts of the country, including disadvantaged communities” (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016a, p. 31), this study noted the potent shortage of ICT training for ESL teachers in rural secondary schools. The incapacity of teachers to employ ICT technologies in ESL teaching was seen by teacher participants as a barrier to the realisation of the goals of the national ICT policy in education. The teachers noted that they were frequently reluctant to employ ICTs in their classrooms because they did not know how to use them. This finding has significant connotations for in-service teachers, who might not feel equipped to use ICTs in their lessons because they were not exposed to this practice during pre-service teacher training. Although TA thought that ICT tools were very helpful in the classroom, she also mentioned that some teachers were uncertain how to make use of them when giving ESL lessons:

In my opinion, it’s a really helpful tool. Although technology is incredibly helpful, the one thing that may be lacking for some of us is that we don’t know how to use it, particularly when we are teaching. We truly don’t know how to use these ICT tools for instruction, except a few of them. Thus, we don’t feel comfortable using them for that purpose.

Similarly, TB felt that although ICT tools were beneficial and offered instructional value, the issue facing teachers was that they lacked the expertise to use them effectively in the classroom:

Our lack of computer skills, plus the fact that the majority of our staff members were not raised around computers, is one of our challenges, in my opinion. As a whole, most teachers consider them to be monsters. We are not properly utilising them to facilitate effective teaching and learning. Apart from that, these are useful tools for us to use. It's possible that you won't need to attend class every day in order to carry out your lessons since they are meant to promote autonomy and independence.

It is interesting how TB links ICTs to monstrosity. This suggests that for many teachers like her, ICTs were something dreaded, something that instilled fear and made teachers want to stay away from it completely. It is ironic that a policy aimed at teacher professional development (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018; Konyana & Konyana, 2013; Manhibi, 2019) ended up engendering ICT phobia for these teachers. Both TB and TA point above to teachers' lack of the necessary technological expertise to manipulate technological tools in the classroom as a barrier to integrating these tools in ESL teaching and learning.

The problem, as explained by TA, was not that teachers had not received any training in utilising ICTs for teaching and learning ESL but that the training offered was insufficient for expert application in the classroom:

Even though MoPSE had provided training, the kind of training has not been consistent, and the seminars were too brief and covered insufficient material. We did not get much training on the pedagogy of using ICT tools.

In the above statement, TA points to the inconsistency of ICT training offered by the government. She expressed the necessity for teachers to have adequate time to put their newly learned ICT abilities into practice. Teachers like her were afraid of looking incompetent when they used ICTs in front of learners. Thus, she thought they should have extra training to help them get comfortable utilising ICTs during teaching. This sentiment gives credibility to the views of Chigona et al. (2014) who stated that teachers who lack self-assurance in their skills to use ICTs are unwilling to incorporate them into their lesson plans. Extending the argument, we propose that for ESL teachers to become comfortable in practising ICT pedagogy in the classroom, they must receive ICT pedagogy training on an ongoing basis.

Significantly, learners were conscious of teachers' deficiency of skills to utilise technology in instruction. One of the learners in the focus group interviews remarked:

I agree that ICT usage in lessons is an advantage to teaching and learning, but it can be challenging if the teachers do not know how to use it. I have seen teachers who are totally unable to incorporate ICT into their lessons. (GC6)

This learner's statement suggests sympathy for teachers who were not proficient in the utilisation of ICTs for ESL teaching, as opposed to criticising them. It is plausible that teachers' unfavourable opinions of ICT utilisation in ESL teaching stemmed from their infrequent access to technical assistance as well as their limited training in ICT resource utilisation.

Discussion of findings

This study's primary finding is that there was a massive gap between policy ideals and implementation practicalities in relation to ICT usage in ESL teaching and learning in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools. The discrepancy was evident in three ways: in the existence of a policy without localised frameworks for implementation, in the implementation of a policy without adequate infrastructure in rural schools, and in the implementation of a policy without professional training of teachers. The variations between the mandatory messaging from the national policy and the actual usage of ICTs in ESL teaching and learning suggests that the goals of ICT utilisation have not been fully met, which means that there are still challenges with using ICTs to teach and learn ESL in Zimbabwean secondary schools located in rural areas. The government drafted the policy of integrating ICTs into teaching and learning for schools to implement but on the ground, the rural schools studied had no customised implementation frameworks and operated with limited infrastructure, while teachers had little training to utilise ICTs in teaching and learning. From a connectivist perspective, these challenges to ICT usage hindered learners' ability to form part of a learning network (Hendricks, 2019; Siemens, 2006). Given that connectivism believes that learning is a socialisation process and is activated when learners belong to a network (Goldie, 2016), it becomes evident that the learners in these rural schools were short changed in their learning, owing to the disjuncture between ICT policy and ICT provisions in their schools. The stark contrast between what policy demanded of schools and what teachers and learners were unable to do in the classrooms points to the need for thinking through practicalities when education policies are being drafted.

From the literature, the MoPSE verified that ICTs had been incorporated into the Zimbabwean school curriculum in response to the widespread adoption of technology as a valuable tool for education and as a necessary set of skills for learners entering secondary education (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016b). Yet, it was not evident that learners' acquisition of the core ESL skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing was part of the agenda for implementing ICTs in schools. Findings from this study indicate that inadequately equipped rural secondary schools conflicted with the national policy that demanded the application of ICTs in teaching and learning activities. Teachers were insufficiently trained and therefore were unable to integrate ICTs in ESL lessons as required by the ICT policy. These under-equipped schools and under-trained staff found it difficult to meet the policy requirements advocating for the utilisation of ICTs to teach ESL. Even access to the internet, something that in other settings would be considered standard, was rarely available in these schools. Despite research showing the benefits of ICTs for English language learning and teaching (Golonka et al., 2014; Jose & Raja, 2011), ICT usage in ESL teaching and learning

in these rural secondary schools remained at a basic level that failed to innovate language education. In this case, there was a disjuncture between the technoscape and the implementation methods.

The findings presented in this study demonstrate that teachers encountered difficulties when attempting to put the government's ICT-related programmes into practice. The direct consequence of this is that English language learning became limited to a particular place and time instead of happening in digital locations where learning is flexible and offers learners varied possibilities (Golonka et al., 2014). One of the key principles of connectivist theory is the flexibility afforded to learners by ICTs (Hendricks, 2019; Siemens, 2006). Learners can update their knowledge anytime and anywhere as they use their technological devices to interact with their networks (Goldie, 2016; Siemens, 2006). However, the findings of this study show that owing to inadequate ICT infrastructure, teachers depended largely on chalk-and-talk pedagogies to deliver their ESL lessons. In addition, limited infrastructure restricted learners' ability to engage with the ESL core skills of listening, reading, writing, and speaking using virtual learning platforms. Connectivism places the use of ICTs at the centre of teaching and learning, and the Zimbabwean national ICT policy can be said to have a connectivist outlook. However, for these rural learners and teachers of ESL, the policy was nothing but a white elephant—beautiful to read about but impractical for everyday teaching and learning in their particular contexts.

Implications of findings

This study's finding on policy implementation without infrastructure presented above underscores the need for the Zimbabwean government to revisit its ICT policy framework in conjunction with its budget for rural secondary schools. If the schools are to realise the government's vision for ICT integration in teaching and learning across subjects, including ESL, then the government through MoPSE must investigate possibilities of deploying renewable energy sources, such as solar power, in rural secondary schools in order to ensure that teaching and learning continue in the event of power outage. The government may also need to investigate the usage of generators powered by biogas. ICT integration problems that remain unresolved in rural schools have the potential to worsen the disparity in academic achievement between rural and urban learners, leading to feelings of social injustice among learners. Thus, this study recommends implementing a programme to supply alternative energy sources to schools that do not receive power from the national grid to address the issue of electricity shortage. Moreover, because ICT pedagogical resources were deemed inadequate by the participants in this study, the government should consider supplying facilities where learners and instructors can use technology in clustered schools. The study recommends that the MoPSE construct well-coordinated technological centres to service clusters of schools in particular areas. This will lessen the budgetary demands on the government while also ensuring that schools have access to ICT resources.

The finding on policy implementation without teacher professional development points to the need for consistent ICT training for teachers and learners in rural secondary schools because this would enable them to use technology expertly and with confidence. We suggest that, to

improve teachers' confidence in integrating digital technology into lessons, the MoPSE should: increase the frequency, funding, and coordination of staff development workshops; establish an efficient system for monitoring and evaluating the incorporation of ICTs into the ESL classroom; and conduct an audit of computers donated to schools to know where shortages exist and meet those shortages. All of these will help teachers build confidence in utilising ICTs in ESL teaching. Of course, the motivation to do so will ultimately come from the teachers themselves.

Lastly, the finding on policy implementation without localised frameworks in schools necessitates that school governing bodies, working in collaboration with MoPSE representatives, dedicate time to sitting down and putting together a clear action plan that translates the national ICT policy into implementable bits for teachers and learners. Such a contextualised plan should outline the steps involved in integrating ICTs into teaching and learning activities, provide clear rules about when and how learners can use their cellphones in school, and specify sites that should not be accessed by learners and teachers using school ICT equipment. The advantage of this is that the plan is likely to necessitate central government funding for ICT usage in the schools.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the extent to which ICT policy and practice matched in ESL teaching and learning in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools. The findings have shown a mismatch in three main ways: policy implementation without localised frameworks for action, policy implementation without infrastructure, and policy implementation without teacher professional development. The study argues that while scholarship on ICT usage in ESL teaching and learning is largely in favour of the deployment of technological tools in ESL activities, limitations to ICT usage in ESL teaching and learning arise from policy itself. The short-sightedness of the Zimbabwean national ICT policy resulted in the limited achievement of its ideals in rural secondary schools. The recommendations proffered above are envisioned to be a guiding torchlight for the government, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, to remedy the evident disjuncture between policy and practice in ICT usage for ESL teaching and learning.

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