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Challenges Faced by Secondary School Learners in Learning Portuguese as a Foreign Language in the Context of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the challenges that secondary school learners of Portuguese encounter in learning Portuguese as a foreign language in the context of Zimbabwean. Data were gathered through interviews, questionnaires, and observation. Twenty-eight participants were Form One and Form Two learners of Portuguese. The findings of the study indicated that secondary school learners experienced challenges in learning Portuguese language a foreign language. Speaking as a language skill was the difficult challenge faced by secondary school learners. The study established learner coping strategies that were employed by respondents in learning Portuguese language concepts. The use of the learner's mother tongue was one of the common strategies employed by the learners in order to grasp and master various concepts of the Portuguese language. This study recommends further studies to be conducted on the role of the learner's mother - tongue in the teaching and learning of Portuguese as a foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the new curriculum in 2015 under the auspicious of the Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022 represents a turning point in the Zimbabwean education system with particular reference to foreign language education. French, Chinese, Portuguese, and Kiswahili were introduced as new learning areas at junior and secondary school levels. Before this development foreign language education was only offered at higher and tertiary education levels and in some or very few private learning institutions. The researchers are of the opinion that as far as foreign language education is concerned in the context of Zimbabwe, it is still at its infancy stage and challenges are likely to be faced in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. The present study sorely concentrates on the challenges faced by secondary school learners in learning Portuguese as a foreign language in the context of a rural setup in Zimbabwe.

The researchers as teachers of Portuguese as a foreign language at a certain rural school in

Zimbabwe observed that when Portuguese was introduced as one of the new learning areas at the school most of the Form One and Form Two learners were excited to learn the Portuguese language, they showed a commendable level of zeal towards the teaching and learning of Portuguese as a foreign language. However, the researchers further noted that the Form One and Form Two learners' day-to-day learning experiences revealed challenges in mastering key Portuguese language concepts. Learning a language in general, includes four key language skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The researchers are of the opinion that among these four language skills, listening is the most important one in learning the Portuguese language. According to Reid (2015) When learners have weaknesses in learning and understanding Portuguese words, phrases, and sounds, the other three skills may not be attained fully because listening is the foundation of the other three. Shih and Yang (2018) suggest that learning any foreign language involves mastering the four language skills in this order listening, speaking,

reading, and writing. Barab and Duffy (2010) suggest that it is important for a learner of any language to appropriately implement these skills, such that if they are not fully developed, it will take learners a longer time to eventually learn a language.

As alluded to earlier, the teaching and learning of Portuguese as a foreign language in Form One and Form Two is still in its infancy stage, this shows that there is a lack of early exposure to Portuguese as a foreign language in Zimbabwe because at both infant and junior school levels Portuguese language is not part of the learning areas. Therefore, secondary school learners are bound to encounter challenges in their day-to-day learning of Portuguese as a foreign language with particular reference to the four key language skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Considering the fundamental role of each of the four language skills in language learning, it is helpful to establish how learners at a rural high school work towards mastering each skill. Establishing challenges and resultant coping strategies could help understand how Portuguese is learned as a foreign language in the context of Zimbabwe.

Importance of study

The study illustrates the underlying challenges that secondary school learners encounter in the learning of Portuguese as a foreign. Further, the study outlines coping strategies developed by secondary school learners. The findings are of great significance in that the findings are to help secondary teachers of Portuguese and learners implement inclusive and robust strategies for effective teaching and learning of Portuguese as well as mastery of Portuguese language skills.

Fundamental language learning concepts

The fundamentals of language learning are the means through which learners achieve the content standards during their daily learning opportunities in the classroom. Solak (2014). Language learning fundamentals are the four micro-skills of any foreign language which include listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills complement each other in all aspects of foreign language planning and teaching, activities and tasks, and resources in the learning process. To get mastery over the foreign language learning, the learners have to learn all the four language skills. The learners should not neglect

any of these skills as each skill has its own importance.

Listening

Among these four skills, listening is the first skill that the learners acquire initially. According to Hornby (2005), the act of listening means, "to pay attention to somebody or something that one can hear. Hornby (2005) further explains that listening is identifying the sounds of speech and processing them into words and sentences. According to Hamouda (2012) learning to listen to the target language improves language ability and substantial and meaningful response, especially in learning a language for communicative purposes. Listening plays a vital role, as it helps the language learner to acquire pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary, and syntax and the comprehension of messages conveyed can be based solely on tone of voice, pitch, and accent (Hamouda, 2012).

Speaking

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information (Richards 2018). Speaking is the ability to convey information verbally and in a way that the listener can understand. In the words of Holden (2004) speaking skills in language learning enables learners to explore ideas and concepts as well as to understand and organize their experiences and knowledge. Holden (2004) further posits that learners use oral language to learn, solve problems, and reach goals. Building on this argument, Peterson (2001) writes that learners need to develop confidence in their oral language abilities.

Reading

Reading is the process of looking at written symbols and letters and understanding the meaning of them (Reid 2011). According to Krashen, (2019), reading extend their knowledge and use of language, increase their understanding of themselves and others, and experience enjoyment and personal satisfaction. Reading provides learners with a means of accessing the ideas, views, and experiences of others (Krashen, 2019). Elaborating on reading as a language skill, Rost (2005) writes that using effective reading skills and strategies, learners construct meaning and develop thoughtful and critical interpretations of a variety of texts. Therefore, reading is important in language learning as it influences other language skills.

Writing

According to Nunan (2019), writing is a productive skill and it is the most complex skill of the four language skills. Writing is the process of using symbols, letters of the alphabet, punctuation, and spaces to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form (Nunan 2019). Writing enables learners to explore, shape, and clarify their thoughts, and to communicate them to others. Gautam (2019) posits that by using effective writing strategies, learners discover more ideas and grow in language learning. Writing helps one think and speak in a foreign language. Cumming (2011) asserts that writing skill is considered the most difficult skill because of its complexity of structure and vocabulary.

Learning a foreign language

Johnson (2017) defines foreign language learning as learning a non-native language outside of the environment where it is commonly spoken. James (2015) points out that any language which is not the mother tongue, and it is learned outside the family context should be viewed as a foreign language. According to Taun (2010), the four skills of foreign language learning allow learners to comprehend and produce spoken language for proper and effective interpersonal communication. Tavit (2010) suggests that learning a foreign language is incomplete without looking at aspects that go along with language learning including learning styles and strategies.

Learning foreign languages in Africa

Foreign language education has been due to different movement-related events, such as enslavement and colonization (Espinosa 2018). The author further argues that there are much fewer lingua francas across the continent. These are mainly English, Portuguese, Spanish, and Arabic. The researchers note that such languages are often considered foreign languages, but are used as languages of educational instruction in many African countries. Clegg (2011) asserts that in Africa, instruction in language learning is given in a foreign language, while children and teachers alike speak African languages. This view is also supported by Hidri and Coombe (2016) who argue that the foreign language, in most countries, is the language of the former colonial master. Elaborating further on this discourse Munoz (2006) writes that in Africa the so-called official language, is a

language neither pupils nor teachers master well and do not normally speak outside school. According to Esinosa (2018), curriculum experts point out that an African child's major learning problem is linguistic. Hidri and Coombe (2016) aptly conclude that instruction is given in a language that is not normally used in his or her immediate context or at home but rather in the target language and in this way, the learner experiences difficulties when learning the target language.

Shadreck (2012) argues that learning in general in African rural areas is a challenge due to economic struggles. Kudakwashe and Richard (2011) point out that, in the context of Zimbabwe rural learners are dropping out of school and getting low grades because they simply do not master the language of instruction which is English. According to Luca (2014), the learner's official language should be the language of instruction when learning foreign languages. However, one may say that this way prevents learners from grasping the subject matter the teacher wants them to learn. The Community of Portuguese Language Countries (2010) confirms that Portuguese is the official language in six African countries namely, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe and Equatorial Guinea. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2020) Portuguese, is the third most spoken language after English and French on the African continent that is originally non-African with its origins in a European country. Matias and Pinto (2020) concluded that in African schools, learners of Portuguese struggle to master the language and text in the target language. According to Clegg (2011) when discussing the language of instruction issue in Africa, one often hears that it would be too costly for the African countries to switch the language of instruction from Portuguese into a familiar African language that the child masters well.

Challenges faced by Portuguese learners in Zimbabwe Portuguese

Learners in Zimbabwe often find the pronunciation of Portuguese words more demanding and challenging. Mearia (2017) assumes that one's memory has a way of fading if things are not reinforced, learners of Portuguese are not exposed to much of Portuguese concepts with

special attention to listening, speaking, reading and writing and therefore they encounter difficulties in mastering Portuguese concepts. Dornyei (2002) observed that the most important problem in Portuguese language learning is the lack of sustainability from primary school to secondary education. She revealed that there was no sustainability in terms of course books and curriculum throughout the education system and when the system is haphazard, learners will be disturbed and hence they will be having challenges in grasping Portuguese concepts.

Strategies that have worked in the learning of Portuguese language as a foreign language in Zimbabwe

Melek (2009) suggested that the grammar-translation approach has been proven as one of the working strategies amongst Zimbabwean learners of Portuguese in which learners prioritize translation from their mother tongue to the target language and memorizing long lists of vocabulary and detailed grammar formats and rules. Viorica (2007) found out that most Zimbabwean learners of Portuguese learn better in their social context where they form groups engage in their own way and help each other in language mastery.

Learner perception on the learning of the Portuguese language

Learning generally differs from one individual to another with factors such as mental abilities, culture, and social settings. Allowing learners to have access to their own way of learning and helping them to find pathways to expand their own learning modalities, provides them with the opportunity to play an active role in the process (Castro, 2016). Learners are their own drivers to successful foreign language learning. According to Mosaddaq (2012) learners who often perceive themselves as less capable, possessing fewer skills, and having a negative attitude may produce low output as a result of giving up hence teachers find it difficult to correct this learner's approach to language learning. Learners have the tendency to cope from one another to another and their attitudes are similar. Most learners are keen to learn and know more, yet others view Portuguese language learning as demanding and difficult.

METHODS

The main objectives of this study are were as follows:

1. To discuss the challenges faced by secondary school learners in learning Portuguese as a foreign language in the context of Zimbabwe.
2. To Assess the practical strategies used by learners to cope with the challenges faced in learning Portuguese as a foreign language in the Zimbabwean context.
3. To proffer inclusive and robust strategies for effective teaching and learning of Portuguese as a foreign language at the secondary school level in the context of Zimbabwe.

Research Approach and Research Design

This study used a mixed approach which Alpha (2013) defines it as the research approach that combines aspects of quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. The data collected was both qualitative and quantitative. Further, this study used survey design because it collected both qualitative and quantitative data. The population relied upon in this study were Portuguese Language secondary school learners at a particular rural high school in the Matebeland North province in Zimbabwe. The study used simple random sampling which is a type of probability sampling in which the researcher randomly selects a subset of participants from a population (Canals 2017). Form one and Form two learners at a particular rural secondary were sampled for data gathering because resources and time could not allow to cover all learners of the Portuguese language. Interview selection was through sampling where five 1s and twenty-two 2s were put in a box totaling to twenty-eight. Those who picked 1s were interviewed. The group Interview sample was random as learners were grouped the way they sat in the classroom. Learners were made to pick papers in a box with fifteen Yes and thirteen No. Those who picked Yes were the ones who answered the questionnaire.

Data Gathering Instruments

Data-gathering instruments are tools used to collect data (Canals 2017). It refers to the tools used by the researcher to actually collect data in the study process. The study used the following data gathering instruments; interview, focus group interview, observation, and questionnaire.

Interview

The interview is a technique where the researcher poses questions to the Interviewee and the Interviewer makes a record of the responses. Khan (2014). The study used two types of Interviews, the individual interview and the group interview. The interview instrument item crafted was done with reference to research questions. It provided an opportunity to ask interviewees to add more detail and give examples and explanations.

Focus group interview.

The group Interview shared insights on the experiences that learners encounter when learning the Portuguese language. Learners were comfortable sharing their thoughts on how they do their class discussions in learning Portuguese.

Interview Procedure

The Interviews were conducted in the teacher's office. They were welcomed and briefed on the purpose of the Interview to make them relax. The interviewer read the interview item to each interviewee and wrote the responses. The interview lasted for five to eight minutes.

Focus group Interview procedure

The first group was interviewed under the Msasa tree in the afternoon. Learners were sited in a circle along with the Interviewer. Learners were asked each question and learners would respond in turns and the responses were written down.

Observation

Observation is defined by Barker (2016) as the social research technique that involves the direct observation of phenomena in a natural setting. The observation guide was used (See appendix) which was drafted in coherence with the research question. The observation tool was used because of its strength which helped get relevant information for the study. The instrument captured information that was real in the natural environment.

Observation procedure

All participants were explained to them how observation was going to be carried out. An agreement to be recorded was made and a notebook was used. The participants were observed in doing group tasks in Portuguese presentations, and mostly in the four macro skills of learning a language. After the Observation was done, participants were thanked for showing their commitment in the study.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions to gather information from respondents (McLeod 2018) The research question helped in drafting questionnaire questions (see appendix) The questionnaire form was designed in a way to capture participant's perceptions. The questionnaire allowed participants to complete the asked questions without fear or influence from the environment. Learners would respond freely and at their own purses.

Questionnaire procedure

Fifteen copies of questionnaire forms were printed out and given to learners. The participants were given time to respond to the questionnaire. The forms were collected after the lesson. The participants were asked not to discuss the questionnaire as a way to fully capture the learner's experiences. In this study, questionnaires encouraged participants to be more honest and open with their responses. However, the questioning technique that was used was a barrier to learners in their responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced in Learning Fundamentals of Portuguese Language

Figure 1. Challenges faced by learners in mastery of Portuguese

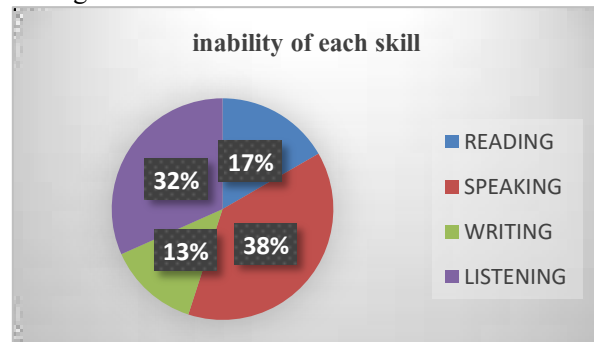


Figure 1 above illustrates that learners have challenges in the four skills of language learning. The challenges vary from learner to learner. For example, thirty-eight percent (38%) of learners have mastered the other three aspects except for speaking, seventeen percent (17%) have a weakness in reading but are fine in the other three. Thirty-two percent (32%) cannot listen and thirteen percent (13%). One respondent said; "I cannot read Portuguese words because the pronunciation of those words is difficult".

This response indicates that one challenge is in pronouncing Portuguese words. A weakness in pronunciation affects the ability to read correctly. From another respondent; “Remembering the pronunciation of the words in Portuguese is a challenge but I can write the words”

Thus, pronunciation in learners is a limitation even though they can write the concept therefore

reading is compromised. The illustration in Figure 1 above suggests that the respondents have limited mastery in each of the four skills in language learning. Such limited mastery of the basic skills may present challenges in learning all aspects of the Portuguese language.

Table 1. Summary of the ability and inability of each skill.

| Nature of skill | Number of learners able to execute a particular skill | Number of learners unable to execute a particular skill | Total |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Reading | 18 | 10 | 28 |
| Speaking | 5 | 23 | 28 |
| Writing | 20 | 8 | 28 |
| Listening | 9 | 19 | 28 |

The table above shows learners’ competency of each skill. Eighteen learners (18) can read Portuguese words and ten (10) cannot. Five learners (5) can speak Portuguese words and twenty-three (23) cannot. Twenty learners (20) can write Portuguese words and eight (8) are unable to. Nineteen (19) learners cannot listen to Portuguese audio and videos and understand whilst nine (9) learners only can comprehend spoken Portuguese language.

One respondent said “To me to speak Portuguese words is very hard because of accents for example começar”. This response indicates that learners have a problem in speaking. Only five (5) learners out of twenty-eight have the ability to read and twenty-three (23) cannot. Some participants pointed out that “Portuguese people are very fast when they are speaking. I sometimes feel confused when listening to you when you are speaking Portuguese”

The study established that the difficulty of each skill leads to the difficulty of another skill. When one cannot read, all the other skills cannot take place because these skills are complementary and all-important in Portuguese learning. Respondents indicated that writing is not a big problem to us but a few cannot. It is better than other skills. Therefore, the researchers conclude that learners feel writing is better as seen in the table above that only eight are having problems in writing in the class.

Strategies for Coping with Challenges

Figure 2. Coping strategies

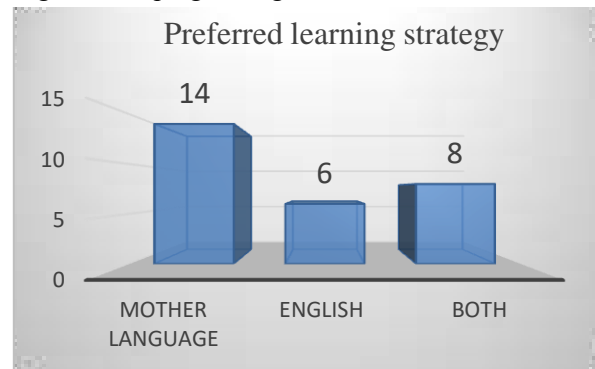


Figure 2 shows strategies that learners use to cope when faced with challenges in learning Portuguese. From the graph, fourteen learners (14) use their mother language only, six (6) use English only, and eight (8) use both English and their mother language to transcribe to Portuguese concepts. For using the mother language, this is what some respondents said: “Using Ndebele to learn Portuguese is helpful to me because I pronounce the words the way I see them in Ndebele”. One respondent argued that “To first translate to Tonga is what I do to understand Portuguese”.

The study established that learners primarily learn Portuguese in their mother tongue. It appears most participants use their mother language when approaching Portuguese concepts. The study also found out that learners are having difficulties in the English language. One respondent confirmed this experience; “I have problems in English as a language so it is hard to learn Portuguese in English”. While another indicated that; “Using

English when learning Portuguese helps me and my classmates”. A few learners who use both English and their mother tongue to learn Portuguese tend to understand Portuguese concepts better.

Implementation of Learning Strategies

Figure 3. Implementation of mother language strategy

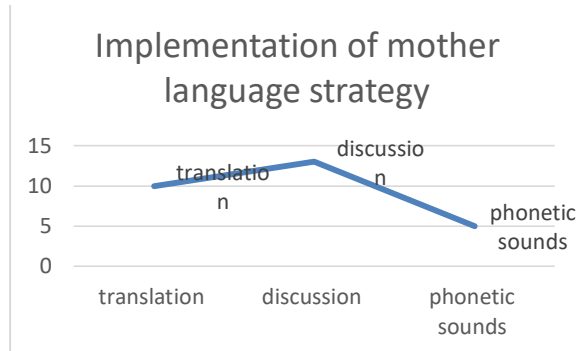
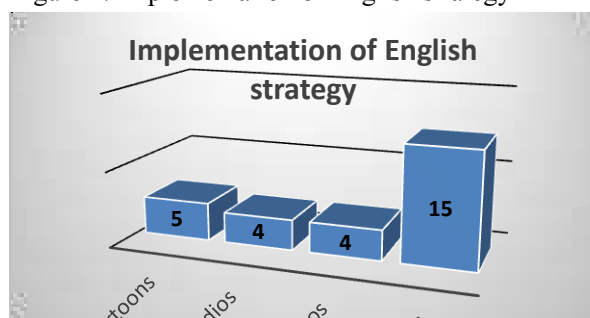


Figure 3 shows that ten (10) learners who use their mother language to translate Portuguese words, thirteen (13) learners use it to discuss Portuguese concepts and five (5) learners use their mother language to sound Portuguese phonics when reading. One explanation given by a learner was; “Sometimes it is hard to use English because it is difficult for us as Portuguese”

From the response above, learners prefer to discuss in their mother language because, they are still in the process of acquiring English as a language and when learning Portuguese in English, they experience difficulties to grasp Portuguese concepts in English. Some learners read Portuguese words in Ndebele phonics for example the word Falar in Portuguese will be read in fa+la+ri as one sees the words in their Ndebele phonemes. Learners who prefer reading through sounding Portuguese phonics in their mother language would get the words correct in their way and therefore their strategy of using their mother language worked for them.

Figure 4. Implementation of English strategy



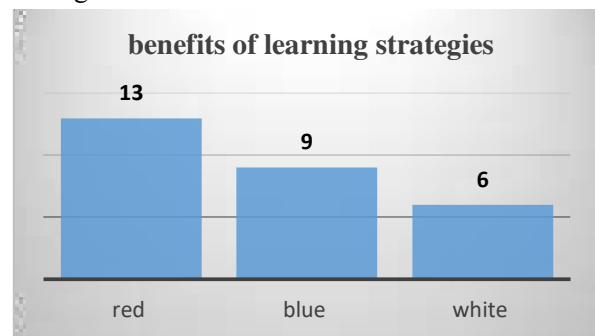
This section discusses preferences done on how and why learners employ strategies. It

illustrates the media considered helpful by different learners. Figure 4 shows the preferences in working with media to learn Portuguese. One comment was; “When we watch Portuguese cartoons with English translation, we understand better. We take an English song and it helps us master Portuguese better as we translate it to Portuguese for example that song which says, head and shoulder, knees and toes”.

Amongst learners, five (5) watch and listen to cartoons translated to English from Portuguese, eight (8) use audio and videos in English to Portuguese, and fifteen (15) use English songs that are translated to Portuguese for better understanding. Those who use songs appear to be dominant. The study established that learners prefer to learn Portuguese from English as a medium of instruction. One respondent indicates; “Some Portuguese words are best read in English for example música is musica”.

Benefits of the Learning Strategies

Figure 5. Summary of benefits of using the strategies above



Key

Red - understanding

Blue - fast learning

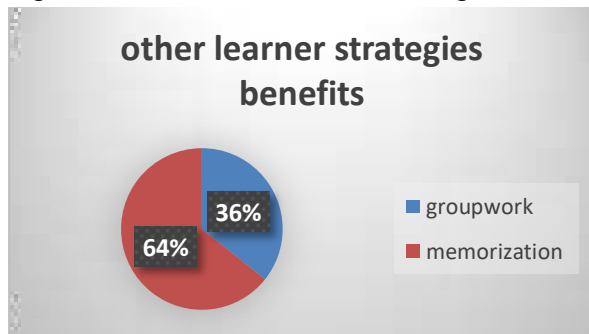
White - remembering

Figure 5 shows the benefits of using mother language in learning Portuguese. Some respondents commented, “I memorise Portuguese words from Tonga to English to Portuguese for example kudya-food-comida, yambula-speak-falar, kuyanda-love amar. It helps me in mastering Portuguese words and I hardly forget them”.

From the illustration above in Figure 5, thirteen (13) learners in red understand Portuguese best from their mother language. Nine (9) learners in blue use their mother language to grasp Portuguese concepts fast and easily. Six (6) learners in white use the mother language to remember Portuguese concepts better. The study observed that

learners primarily use their mother languages to master the Portuguese language. It might be clear that Portuguese learners at the school learn Portuguese in various mother languages which is helping them best to understand Portuguese. The study observed, that learners learn more in their mother language than in English including those who said English is better for them after seeing the results of using the mother language in learning Portuguese language.

Figure 6. Benefits of other learner strategies



The above shows the learner's working strategies when learning Portuguese. One participant indicated that; "We do groupwork and homework to help others". Another respondent said; "I memorize the words to avoid forgetting them and it works. I sometimes sing the memorized words". It presents sixty-four percent (64) of learners memorize words to help them remember. Thirty-six percent (36%) use group work to help each other on learned concepts. The study found out that there are times when learners learn on their own and do what they do to help others understand. This indicates that learners have their ways best known to them that work for them in learning Portuguese. Memorization and home-works work best for them.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to establish challenges that secondary school learners encounter when learning Portuguese as a foreign language and the coping strategies they adopted for effective learning. The participants in the study were Form One and Form Two learners at a rural school in Zimbabwe. The mixed method approach had data gathered through observation, questionnaire, and focus group Interviews. Data presentation was in the form of tables, pie charts, and graphs. The study revealed that secondary school learners have not mastered the four language learning skills. It established that among the four language learning

skills, speaking is the most challenging skill, followed by listening, reading, and writing. The study found out that some learners cannot speak Portuguese words or phrases but they are able can read Portuguese words or phrases. Listening to Portuguese audio and watching videos was difficult for them. Learners were failing to write some Portuguese words with ascents and tone marks. Reading is compromised because of their weak pronunciation capabilities.

In terms of strategies used by secondary school learners to cope with the challenges faced in learning Portuguese as a foreign language in a rural school setup, the study found out that learners used their mother tongue to help them learn the sought Portuguese language concepts. Learners formed their own groups to interrogate and explain concepts amongst themselves through their respective mother tongues. The study revealed that learners implement these strategies mostly through discussing and translating from Portuguese to their mother tongue. They used their mother languages to translate from Portuguese to English. Therefore, learners use their mother tongue as the bridge from Portuguese to English. Some learners articulate Portuguese words the way they see the words in their mother language and this way worked for them. In line with the findings of the study, the researchers conclude that the strategy of employing the mother language promotes better learning of Portuguese concepts. Learners feel free and accommodated for being allowed to use their mother language. The strategy appeared to promote the recalling of concepts learned. The researchers further conclude that the English language is still a challenge as Portuguese is, therefore using English to translate from Portuguese is difficult to some learners of a rural background probably due to limited exposure to the English language. The study also revealed that secondary school learners prefer to memorize and cram when mastering Portuguese words. These ways of Portuguese language learning crafted by learners of Portuguese at the school improved the mastery of Portuguese language learning skills.

Recommendations of the study

In line with the findings of this study, the researchers make the following recommendations:

Learners need to be taught listening and speaking skills first as these are the basic skills for

language learning. Teachers of foreign languages need to establish more suitable learner strategies that might be useful for language learning. Since the English language is the medium of instruction, there is a need to devise inclusive strategies to help learners master English language skills as they are the foundation for Portuguese language learning.

Area for further studies

The researchers identify the following as possible areas for further studies. Further research could be conducted on the possible role of the mother language in learning the Portuguese language.

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