Phonological Ambience and its Relation to Error Commission in Academic Writing: The Case of Shona

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Abstract: *A standout contribution of this research is its contrastive study of the phonological system of the dialects of Shona, herein called the mother tongue (L₁) and the phonological system of standardised Shona, herein called the second language (L₂). The Phonological differences affect academic writing. An inventory of phonological errors learners commit was made. Knowledge of the phonological errors learners make direct teachers to adopt best practices to avert the spelling challenges. Teachers' practical exposure to learners' spelling challenges indicates to them where the challenges come from. This finds explanation in participating teachers claiming that the Standard Shona Orthography (SSO) needs reforming to become all-encompassing by tolerating dialect phonologies. The commission of phonological errors by learners is a sign of the inadequacies of the current SSO. However, the commission of the phonological errors is testament of an individual building his/her 'house of self-identity and self-consciousness since the language they speak identifies them. Oral or written communication circumscribes self-identity and self-consciousness. This study emphasises identity formation and self-consciousness through wider use of one's mother tongue. 'The mother' that is in all of us affects competence and fluency in the use of the Shona language in academic work. Of the many indigenous languages enshrined in the Zimbabwean school curriculum, this study examined how Shona language learners' competence in academic writing is affected by home language phonologies. The students' errors are due to their failure to realise the dissonance that exists between home languages herein coded (L₁) and school language herein coded L₂.*

Keywords: *Interlingual, phonological awareness, phonological ambience, morphophonological, error, first language, second language*

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1. Introduction

Phonological spelling errors can be a result of learners' poor grasp of the phonology of a language. This is particularly noticeable concerning the use of a second language at school (the standardised Shona language) that has dissonant phonological relationship with their mother language.

Phonological errors in Shona academic writing impede leaners' fluent and competent spelling that is needed and necessary for effective communication albeit the words are spelt differently but mean the same. Such errors by learners usually result from a mismatch or dissonance between dialect's and standard language's sound systems. This paper problematizes the type and impact of phonological errors learners commit when they write in Shona at school.

Phonological ambience denotes a linguistic setting or a distinctive linguistic environment in which phonological items exist. In short, it is the quality and character a sound assumes as defined by its setting or environment. The setting or environment is circumscribed by either standard Shona orthography parameters or Shona dialect

parameters. As argued in this paper, the attendant parameters influence the acceptability of phonemes used in the environments outlined. The two environments affect language use. Zimbabwean schools are no exception in the praxis. There is unprecedented emphasis on the use of standard Shona phonemes for the acceptable spelling of words. The use of dialect phonemes when spelling words in academic writing is penalisably incorrect spelling of words. On the contrary, Magwa (2002) avers that there is 80% to 90% intelligibility among Shona dialects. It is a folly not to give functional space in academic writing to dialect phonemes when the dialects have such a high level of intelligibility.

Katz (1989) in Abu-Rabia and Taha (2004) suggests that accord between phonological units and orthographic units leads to production of correct spelling. This ties up neatly with Manis' and Seidenberg's (2001) in Abu-Rabia and Taha (2004) reasoning that the way a phonological unit is pronounced, determines its mapping onto orthographic unit/spelling.

Human beings, gregarious as they are, consort with other human beings communicatively through the medium of language. The medium needs to be flawless in order to achieve effective communication. Correlative relation and integration of phonological and orthographic awareness are pre-requisites for good spelling ability and competence (Hurford & Sanders, 1990, in Pijper, 2003). In short, all theories of spelling include role of phonology in spelling ability (Kamhi & Hinton, 2000 in Pijper, 2003). If Magwa (2002) is correct to refer to Shona people as speaker-writers, it is safe then to conclude that sound-spelling correspondence of Shona is highly regular. As such, the probability that those phonological errors are committed when writing is substantially high. To this end Magwa (2002) argues that the standard Shona orthography gives no respect to dialectal variations, neither does it allow Shona speaker-writers to write their language the way they would speak it. This is a lineal result of **Dual-Route Model** of spelling. The model states that known words are accessed directly via the **lexical route**. The other route, the **non-lexical route** encodes and decodes sound patterns as the spelling is negotiated. This route, according to Brown & Ellis (1990) in Pijper (2003), utilises phonological awareness. This route is pertinent and relevant in showing how Shona speaker-writers from dialects other than Zezuru are prone to committing phonological errors when engaged in academic writing at school. Fries (1945) contends that native language or mother tongue causes interlingual or transfer or interference errors in situations where standardised language is used like in the Zimbabwean case. All said and done, it is prudent to conclude that being cognisant of phonological ambience is a crucial and critical factor in explaining prevalence of phonological spelling errors in alphabetic writing systems like Shona.

Several researchers claim that some children grow up in contexts where languages and their dialects exist. When they go to school, they abandon their home languages and write in the standardised language of school. They struggle to learn in the standard language that they are barely proficient or competent in (Bender, et al., 2005). This paper contends that dialects of Shona in Zimbabwe are denied functional space in the education domain.

The school and home contexts represent different cultures that can influence or affect language use. **H**ome **L**anguage (**HL**) interferes with how **S**chool **L**anguage (**SL**) is used in academic writing. Kellaghan and Greaney (1992) argue that learners from such linguistic environments of HL and SL are not very competent in language proficiency. Their performance in academic written language work is below par.

Learning Shona at school is like learning a second language. It is difficult because, as Saville-Troike (2006) presents, language elements acquired in **HL** will be transferred to the target **SL**. Mother tongue transfer or interference affects one's writing in the target school language (Touchie, 1986 in El Malaki, 2020). Ellis (2015) also explains that the learner's home language affects school language. The number of errors that a learner commits can explain the effect best. The interference of the learner's mother tongue causes phonological spelling errors. The transfer usually has negative effects if the language elements in **HL** and in **SL** are not in accord. The mismatch and dissonance between the elements transferred from **HL** and those of the target language, **SL**, usually leads to production of incorrect spelling and grammar structures. It affects learners' proficiency, competence and performance in Shona language learning. Learners commit various orthographic errors emanating from such a relationship between the dialects of Shona and the standard Shona that we have today which is mainly Zezuru-based (Chimhundu, 2005) which is herein considered the school language (**SL**). Goody (1996) asserts that, the world over, alphabets or orthographies are ethnocentric. This is polemic. As a result, many students have complied, grudgingly with the pressure to change brought to bear by linguistic discrimination. Speaker–writers from the other Shona dialects other than Zezuru experience problems of spelling as they use the current Shona orthography (Chimhundu, 2005) which is not ethnocentric. Spelling problems are a result of symbol shortage that glaringly characterises the Shona orthography that is in use. There is a disturbing disparity between home language and school language.

Pieces of written work that are fraught with errors are scored very lowly. It is, therefore, worth persisting with learning to spell well. Poor spelling as per current Shona orthography can be embarrassing and costly to learners when they do not spell well in Shona examinations.

O-Level students make orthographical errors of a spelling nature when writing in Shona. The following is a list of some of the orthographical errors students commit:

1. **All spelling errors**
2. Use of small letters for capital or vice versa
3. Omissions of a word or words, and even slips
4. Wrong punctuation
5. Wrongly completed parenthesis
6. False concords
7. Incorrect word division
8. Incorrect use of hyphens

(<u>Adapted from</u>: *Zimbabwe School Examinations Council, Composition and Comprehension Marking Scheme, 2011:3*).

Of all the orthographical errors listed above, this paper is particularly concerned with delineating spelling errors according to type, cause and effect on writing fluency or competence.

The marking scheme for O-Level Shona Paper 3159/1 instructs examiners to award marks to composition <u>after considering orthography</u>. The number of orthographical errors a student commits in writing a composition determines composition grades. (Zimbabwe School Examinations Council, Composition and Comprehension Marking Scheme, 2011: 5-6). It is unfortunate in some cases that students who come from dialects other than Zezuru are prone to committing numerous phonological spelling errors that are dialectal. Unfortunately, the current standard Shona orthography does not allow them to write their language as they speak it.

This study aims to reveal the factors that lead to inappropriate use of Shona dialectal phonologies by learners. The inappropriate use of dialectal phonologies leads to subsequent commission of phonological spelling errors by students when they write in standard Shona at school. An effort to find the factors is a worthwhile mitigatory measure of the prevalence of phonological spelling errors in students' pieces of written work. Knowledge of the factors could help teachers encourage learners to make an effort to remember and master spelling well (India Today Web Desk, 2017). This is critical when writing in standard Shona as prescribed by the current Shona orthography. Learners will cease losing many marks in ZIMSEC O-Level Paper 3159/1 Shona examinations because they will likely commit fewer phonological spelling errors.

1.1 Objectives

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:
1. To explore the factors that cause learners to make phonological spelling errors when writing in Shona.
2. To find out types of phonological spelling errors that learners commit when writing in Shona.
3. To proffer solutions to the mitigation of phonological errors learners commit when writing in Shona.

1.2 Research questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What causes phonological spelling errors that learners make when writing in Shona? This question drew attention to an evaluation and critiquing of the current Shona orthography that is in use checking on 'how' the factors can lead to poor spelling leading learners to commit penalisable errors when writing in Shona.

2. What phonological spelling errors do students make when writing in Shona? This question excited a critical analysis and evaluation of the Shona orthography regarding phonological spelling errors that learners make when writing in Shona.

3. What are the solutions to the phonological spelling errors learners make? This question focused on **how** the current Shona orthography and its engagement in the classroom can be interrogated and fine-tuned and realigned to ameliorate the challenges that come with it as a writing system. It is proposed that such an endeavor helps mitigate the prevalence of phonological errors that learners commit when engaged in academic writing.

2. Literature Review

This study focuses on Zimbabwean perspectives on Shona orthography in broad and general approaches. The perspectives ground and contextualise this research as it interrogates the challenges of the Shona orthography that is used in Zimbabwean schools.

Language affects students both socially and pedagogically. They are viewed as poor spellers as conventions of the standard language that is preferred in academic writing display disparities with the home

language. The orthography in use is confusing and unfriendly to its users in terms of its characters not matching home languages' characters.

Spelling challenges caused by mother tongue interference are experienced in the way learners engage with academic writing that flagrantly recognises and prefers the use of standard language only (Msanjila, 2005). Usually these errors are a manifestation of phonological disparities found between standard language and dialect languages. Home language disposition affects learners' spelling competency. There are problems associated with using an orthography that excludes some letters from other Shona dialects, Magwa (2007) highlights. Below are some Shona words that learners may spell incorrectly due to mother tongue interference.

Table 1: Comparison of standard Shona spelling and ethnic dialect spelling

Standard Shona Spelling	Ethnic Dialect Language Spelling
ma**h**ewu	ma**x**ewu (**Karanga** dialect)
rwendo	**gw**endo (**Karanga** dialect)
vana	**w**ana (**Manyika** dialect)
nzira	**zh**ira (**Karanga** dialect)
mu**h**oro	mu**x**oro (**Karanga** dialect)
tumbudzi	**x**umbudzi (**Korekore** dialect)

Ndamba (2008) argues that additive bilingualism has no negative effect on learners' linguistic acumen. However, in Zimbabwe, this model of bilingualism has no space in language teaching and learning. The subtractive model of bilingualism that has negative effects on language teaching and learning has that space in the domain of language teaching and learning. This is regrettable considering that language proficiency is a sine qua non in language teaching and learning (Cummins, 2012). Mazrui (1998) in Ndhlovu (2008) is of the same view that people should be afforded the right to use a language they are most proficient in. However, students who hail from dialects that feed the least into the standard language vocabulary inventory have low competency levels in language proficiency (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1992). Following up on this, learners from Shona dialects display dialect overtones in the way they spell and that affects their proficiency and competency in academic writing. Such contexts ground and contextualise this paper as it quests to establish the interface between ethnic identity and spelling errors that affect some learners in academic writing. This interface is strongly aligned to mother tongue interference. The interference by the mother tongue causes the errors that learners commit when engaged in academic writing. This affects the performance of learners as they commit various orthographic errors emanating from the relationship between the other Shona dialects' phonologies and the standard Shona phonology that is mainly Zezuru-based (Chimhundu, 2005). There are challenges that come along with learning Shona that has a heavy Zezuru bias. When Zezuru dialect was selected by default as a basis for both spelling and grammar (Chimhundu, 2005:102), other Shona dialects were sidelined. In fact, the choice of Zezuru dialect as a norm of reference should have been shepherded by the desire to recognise and accommodate all languages and language groups (Ndhlovu, 2008). This implies acceptance and accommodation of dialect phonologies in the Shona writing system preferred in the academic writing domain.

While Sharma (2016) postulates that no writing system the world over represents speech accurately, Kress (2000) in Jaffe (2000) argues that writing spells speech. The two divergent positions lead to a position safe enough to take; that of making an effort to devise and maintain a match between orthography and speech. This will exonerate our learners from interference errors.

In conclusion, I wish to state that it excites wonder to learn that spoken language does not correlate with writing. If a standard language marks correct usage of language, so use of dialect language embodies incorrectitude. Undeniably, this misnomer gropes for realignment by way of orthography reform that induces acceptability, pedagogy, inclusion and empowerment of speakers of other dialects of Shona. Orthography reform underscores achievement of a dialectologically sympathetic, accommodative and empowering trajectory as concerns the Shona writing system.

2.1 Conceptual framework

This research adopted a qualitative inquiry. This qualitative inquiry is guided by two theoretical perspectives visa vis **Critical Theory** and **Theory of Alphabetic Writing. These theories** directed the questions asked to collect the data for this study. A Conceptual Framework sheds clarity on a set of data while also laying ground for change or reform in educational circles. Certainly, our standard Shona orthography needs to be reformed so that it accommodates dialect variations. The commission of phonological spelling errors can be mitigated by using an orthography that is tolerant and sympathetic to dialect variations.

The two theories were twinned. An orthography borne out of that twinning could improve pupils' performance in spelling by minimizing phonological spelling errors when writing. A new orthography with more new characters that match the sounds of the dialect languages could prove more adaptive and sensitive to dialectal variations. Dialect languages will be preserved and saved from linguicide.

Critical is derived from 'kriticos', a Greek word that means thinking very deeply to solve problems in society. A different view suggests the ability to analyse social life and solve society's problems (Luke et al., 2009). Its major attributes of (**a**) social emancipation and citizens' contentment (Nowlan, 2001), and (**b**) extrapolating the relationship between psychoanalysis (*people's perceptions about a phenomenon*) and social change, make it a useful tool for addressing perceived linguistic pathologies bedeviling society. A conceptual framework as critical as this is welcome hence, the adoption of **Critical Theory,** which Freire (1970) and Nowlan (2001) view as an internationally revered pathway to intellectual end educational enquiry.

The learning of any language has to have a cultural 'voice' (Luke et al., 2009). This underlines the view that learning and writing a language should spell speech. That complements identity formation by providing learners a chance to link their school experiences to their day-to-day lives in their cultures. This speaks to an ecosystem of diverse learning where learners' varying linguistic backgrounds are respected. An orthography that subsumes uniform representation of speech and disregards dialect variations facilitates egalitarian use of written language. The *etic* view of orthography (*one that is thoroughly standardized and prescriptive*) is given up and gravitates towards an *emic* view of orthography that takes into account the language users' perceptions. The perceptions are that the existing orthography is not user friendly for indigenes. It is fraught with omissions of needed letters. Learners hailing from varying Shona dialects are forced to write the language not as they speak it.

The other theory that guides this research, the **Theory of Alphabetic Writing**, concerns itself with associating graphemes and phonemes with speech sounds of a people. Mwansa (2017) further explains that Alphabetic Writing Systems are based on Alphabetic Principle that states that phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (letters) should have a one-to-one correspondence. People are forced to write what they do not speak. This researcher chooses to call this linguistic pathology that **Critical Theory** emancipates people from. People of the other Shona dialects are emancipated when they are allowed to write as they speak. To this, Treiman and Kessler (2014) argue that children should be allowed and made to listen, **speak** and **write** their language. This will reveal their identity, their language and their culture. The 'speak and write' attributes mentioned above connote accommodativeness of the desired orthography. The Shona orthography is transparent. It is usually, according to Upward (1997) and Mwansa (2017), easier to get correct spellings in such orthographies. It is this paper's argument that students who come from the other Shona dialect zones are prone to committing phonological spelling errors when writing in Shona at school since they are forced to write what they do not speak.

Theory of Alphabetic Writing associates graphemes and phonemes with speech sounds. With these two theories collaborating, a proposal is given for an orthography that tolerates dialect variances and minimises commission of phonological spelling errors. The orthography so developed is accommodative of dialect variations. With this point in mind, a new reformed orthography is a welcome one bearing in mind that it allows, Treiman and Kessler (2014) purport. Views mentioned in the preceding paragraphs underlie cultural and social components of orthography. These underpinnings are integral in **Critical Theory** and **Theory of Alphabetic Writing.** Twinning the two theories gets the job done.

3. Methodology

The study participants were purposively selected. **Purposive sampling** was adopted for this research study. The choice of participants was deliberate in order to gather data that was relevant and adequate to answer research questions sufficiently. Sufficiency comes from adequacy and diversity of data that was collected. It is **Purposive sampling** only that can assure these characteristics are realisable.

Purposive sampling guided the choice of O-level learners and O-level teachers at a selected case school to participate. The choice of a case (my own underlining) is in itself purposive. These parameters assured the researcher of having, in his sample, participants that gave reliable data that made it possible to answer research questions. The data collected enabled the researcher to generate robust and rigorous data discussion making a

clear case of the challenges of phonological spelling errors that learners commit in academic writing when applying the Shona orthography in schools.

The research is largely a qualitative one. Interviews, questionnaires, documentary analyses are some of the methods that were used to collect data. A voice recorder and camera augmented these data collection methods. As it stands, triangulation could not slip through the fingers, owing various data collecting methods were used. Denzin & Lincoln (2000) correspondingly advise that qualitative researchers need to use varied methods to collect empirical data that together or separately provide significant insights.

Below, is a tabular illustration of the adopted data collecting procedures. It highlights purposes, strategies and data analysis procedures.

Table 2: Table of Data Collecting and Analysis Procedures

Purpose	Strategies for data collection	Source of data	Analysis coding system
Extrapolation of how the Shona orthography is viewed, proposed and applied in the O-level Shona curriculum -the Official Recontextualisation Field (**ORF**) which involves the <u>State</u> **&** Pedagogic Recontextualisation Field (**PRF**) which involves the <u>Local Educational Authority</u> -Bernstein (1990)	Documentary analysis	**a)** National Syllabus (The State) & **b)** School Syllabus (The Local Educational Authorities **c)** Learners' text books and exercise books **d)** Any other teaching and learning materials	**a)** Deductive and Inductive- Bernstein's (1990), principles of classification and framing **b)** Valverde et al's., (2002) unit of analysis **c)** Curry (2015) says inductive approaches are used to interpret textual information that will be gathered in qualitative research
Exploring teacher's and learners' views about Shona orthography and its application	**a)** Interviews **b)** Questionnaires **c)** Learner journals	O-level **a)** teachers and **b)** learners at the case school	**a)** Curry (2015) says inductive approaches are used to interpret textual information that will be gathered in qualitative research **b)** Deductive and Inductive- Bernstein's (1990), principles of classification and framing
Understanding how dialect nuances may influence and affect the teaching and learning of Shona that is standardized	**a)** Lesson observations **b)** Digital voice recordings	O-level Shona classes	Inductive approaches
Exploring the influence of dialect identities on learners	**a)** Questionnaires	a) O-level learners b) O-level teachers	Inductive and

and the pedagogical repertoire of teachers	**b**) Semi-structured group interviews		Deductive approaches
	c) voice recordings		

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Takeaways from realising that Shona dialect language is different from Standard Shona language

Dialects of a language exist in different geographical areas (Syal & Jindal, 2005 in Tegegne, 2015). This is true considering the dialects of the Shona language in Zimbabwe. They exist in different geographical areas of Zimbabwe as shown on the map underneath.
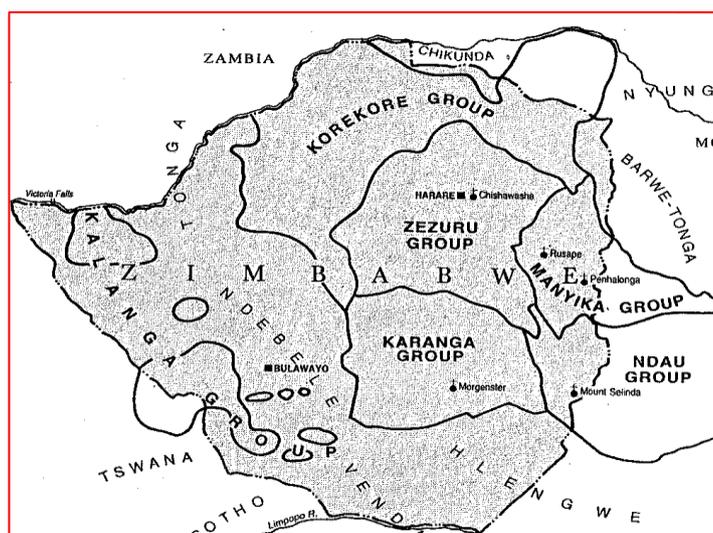

Figure 1: Magwa (1999)

Karanga is found in **Masvingo** and surrounding areas
Manyika is found in **Mutare** and surrounding areas
Zezuru is found in **Harare** and surrounding areas
Korekore is found in areas **north of Harare**

In a narrow sense, Hudson (2001) states that dialect refers to same language. Subtle differences characterise that language and its dialects. The standard spelling of certain Shona words is nuanced by the dialect disposition of learners. As such, it does not make much sense that some graphemes that represent sounds of the dialect varieties are excluded in the orthography. Gone should be the days when orthographies, particularly for erstwhile colonial African countries, were designed along etic lines (views that orthography should be standardised and prescriptive). Now is the time for reforming these orthographies, Shona orthography in particular, to give them a 'indigenous cultural voice and outlook'. This entails designing the orthographies along emic lines (views that orthography should be neither standardised nor prescriptive). This will allow people to write as they speak. Zimbabwean linguists campaign vigorously for the reforming of the Shona orthography to become neither standardised nor prescriptive.

Chimhundu (1992) in Magwa (2002:7) notes that,

> …in 1982, the Ministry of Education (*in Zimbabwe-my addition*) issued a

directive removing the restrictions on the use of letters and diagraphs that are otherwise permitted by the alphabet allowing controlled flexibility in spellings

The removal of the restrictions only allowed controlled flexibility for dialect overtones. This accorded students from dialects other than Zezuru sitting for Shona examinations some reprieve. The dialect overtones observed in learners' written work ceased to cause phonological spelling errors. Learners were thus accorded the space to write as they speak their language.

Documentary analysis of learners' exercise books at the case school revealed that their disposition to home or family language dominates their linguistic mental faculties. Such dialect inclinations destabilize memories of standard Shona spelling, causing learners to commit certain phonological spelling errors when writing at school. Dialect language is non-standard and considered wrong and inappropriate in academic writing. The following picture (Figure 2) is clear testimony of the interference of the mother tongue. The picture shows how a learner with Karanga background spells when writing in Shona. Cenoz & Genesee (1998) in Kahn-Horwitz et.al (2014), hint that transfer occurs more amongst linguistically and orthographically related languages. The

related languages in this case are the Shona dialects and the standardised Shona. This is a good example of the influence of crosslinguistics, more precisely its offshoot called *negative transfer* (Odlin, 2012; Alonso, 2019). For the purpose of this research, this refers to phonological repertoire of the source language (Karanga dialect) being transferred to the target language (standard Shona that has a heavy Zezuru bias). The influence is negative as can be observed in the picture that the learner was marked wrong as having committed phonological spelling errors. The use of dialect language exudes incorrectitude. This explains why spoken language does not correlate with writing regarding the standard Shona language whereby learners speak one language (the home language) and write another (the standard language used in academic writing).

Errors indicated by red arrows in the picture below are phonological errors where the use of Karanga phoneme /-***gw***-/ is not acceptable in standard Shona
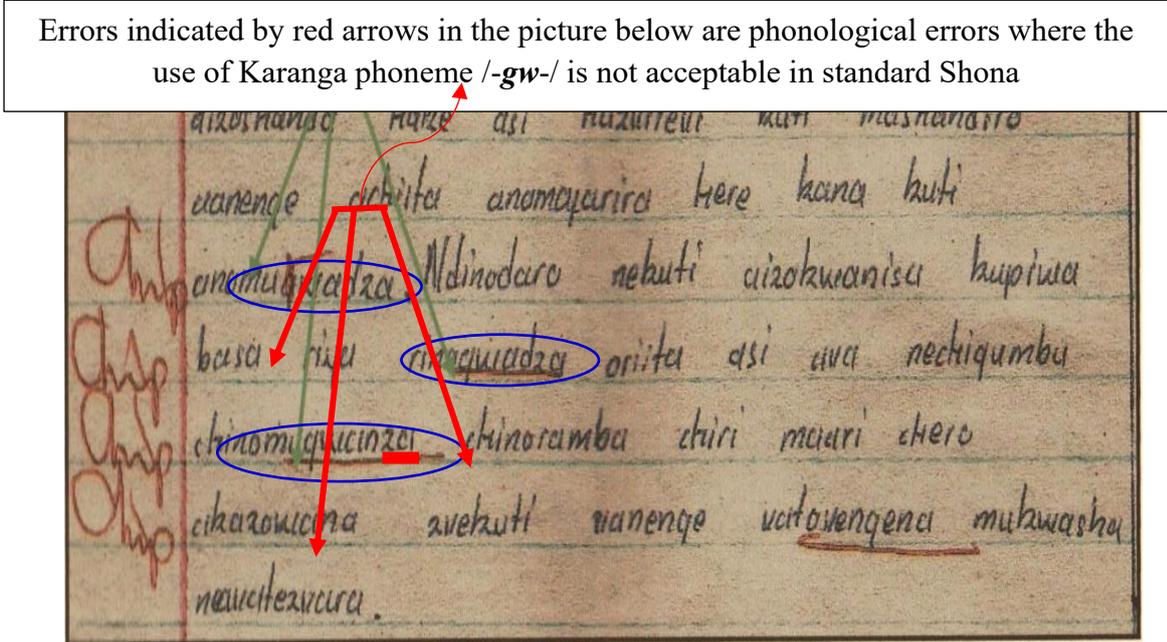

Figure 2: Errors indicated by red arrows in the picture above are phonological errors where the use of Karanga phoneme /-gw-/ is not acceptable in standard Shona

The teacher at the case school indicated the spelling of the following words */anomu**gw**adza, chinomu**gw**adza and rino**gw**adza/* as wrong spellings by his infamous /**chip**/, which is a short form for *chiperengo* in Shona or spelling when translated to English. The use of the Karanga phoneme /***gw***/ is not permitted by the standard Shona orthography. When the standard Shona orthography was formulated, the phoneme was not taken in. It is this paper's argument that certain dialectal phonemes give learners spelling challenges when the mother tongue interferes. It is not only the Karanga dialect phoneme /gw/ that is problematic, but also the use of many dialect phonemes gives learners spelling problems. Not all other Shona dialects were accorded equal or equitable chance to feed into standard Shona orthography when it was formulated. The same participant teacher cod-named **T₁** at the case school lamented that,

> "...we come up with different spelling for the same word, (meaning that) ...our language is not standardized completely."

A participant academic, code-named **A₁**, also raised two pertinent ideas that:

a) *....use of one's dialect is penalisable* and
b) *....some words present spelling challenges... You will find out that we come up with different spelling for the same, (saka) so that is a problem.*

Interpretation of the academic's and participant teacher's contribution irrefutably means that there is not a uniform way of writing spellings of words that mean the same. This implies that the Shona orthography needs reform. The problem of spelling errors emanate from the dissonance that characterises the Shona dialect/home languages and standard Shona language used in academic writing at school. According to Protopapas et.al, (2012), such spelling errors are individuatable and categorisable as phonological errors as indicated in Figure 2 on page 15. This type of error changes the phonological form of a word. In the case indicated in Figure 2, the written word is pronounced differently from the one accepted as standard spelling because of different graphophonemic mappings confirming Magwa's (1999) observation that different Shona dialects use different graphemes to represent the same sound as shown in Table 1 on page 7 or Table 4 page 18.

The picture that follows serves to illustrate the point that there was selective feeding by the Shona dialects into the standard Shona orthography.
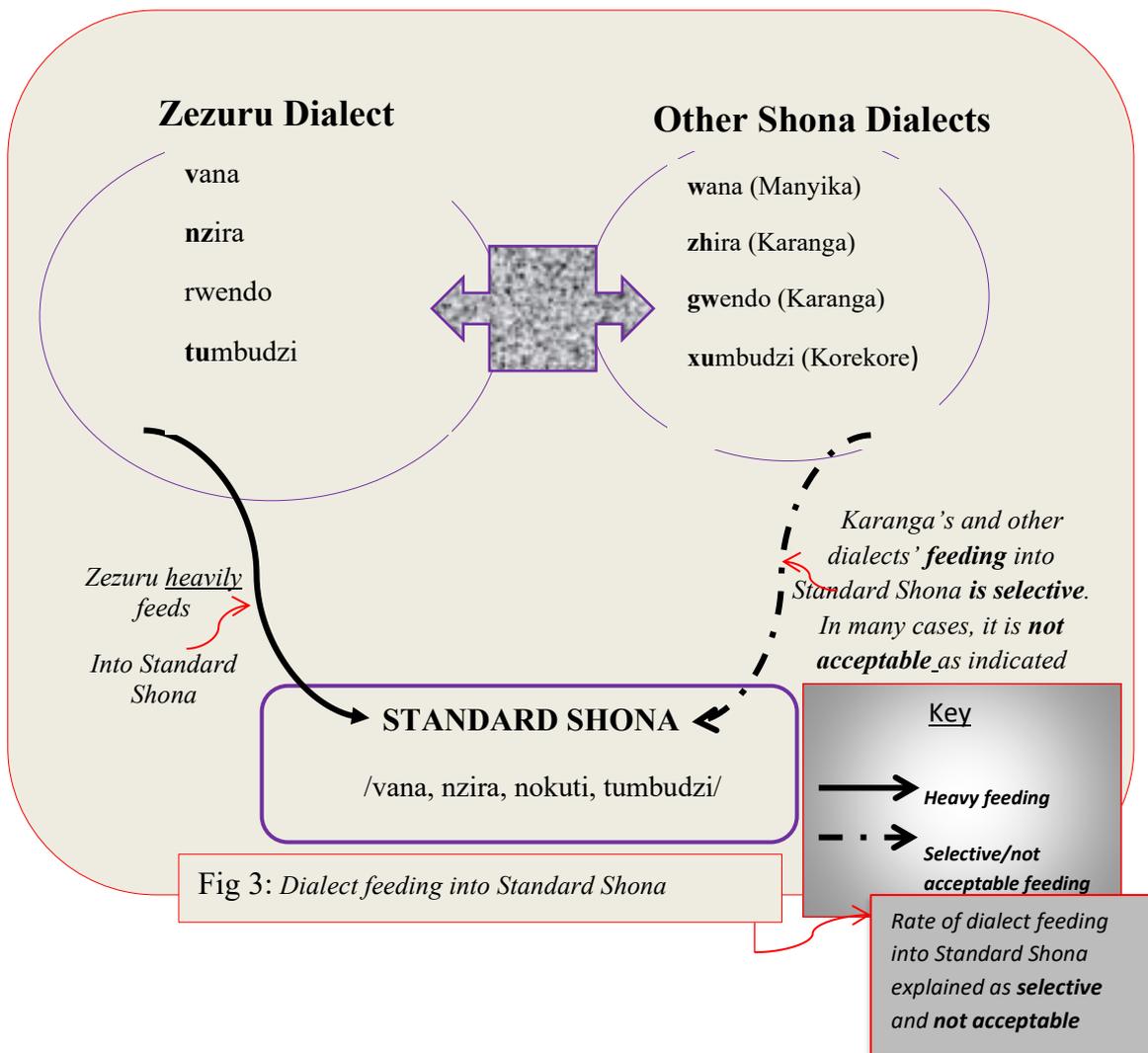
Zezuru Dialect

vana

nzira

rwendo

tumbudzi

Other Shona Dialects

wana (Manyika)

zhira (Karanga)

gwendo (Karanga)

xumbudzi (Korekore)

Zezuru _heavily_ feeds

Into Standard Shona

*Karanga's and other dialects' **feeding** into Standard Shona **is selective**. In many cases, it is **not acceptable** as indicated*

STANDARD SHONA

/vana, nzira, nokuti, tumbudzi/

Key

Heavy feeding

Selective/not acceptable feeding

*Rate of dialect feeding into Standard Shona explained as **selective** and **not acceptable***

Fig 3: *Dialect feeding into Standard Shona*

4.2 The challenges of delimiting dialects of a language.

Delimiting one dialect from another gives rise to spelling problems as the mother tongue interferes. This is the genesis of language standardisation as efforts to mitigate mother tongue interference as a cause of poor spelling take centre stage. This undertaking is usually plagued by consideration of a certain variety as better than the other. On the contrary, Romaine (2000) in Tegegne (2015) advises that no language variety (dialect) is better than the other. To this end, de Beer (2010) advises that learners can achieve better academic excellence if writing is done in a way that is responsive to their culture (or language that is an embodiment of culture). A nonprofessional's understanding of the exercise of standardisation is that there should be equal feeding by every variety into the standard language's orthography.

Unfortunately, the modus operandi in the Dokean orthography for Shona side-lined other dialects in preference of Zezuru. The orthography has a heavy Zezuru bias as depicted in Figure 3 on page 16 above. Words from certain Shona dialects were denied inclusion in the present orthography in preference of Zezuru word forms. This biased choice of Zezuru over other dialects is what led to the marginalization of these dialects.

When the mother tongues interfere in the way learners write in the academic domain, they are seen as bad spellers. The participating teachers in this study admit that spelling is confusing and difficult for them. The following table shows results of a survey conducted at the case school to solicit their views on learners' spelling challenges:

Table 3: What teachers said…

	Number of teachers who say…			
	…is **not confusing** and **does not affect competence**	…is **a bit confusing** and **affects competence a bit**	…is **confusing** and **affects competence**	…is **very confusing** and **affects competence very much**
Spelling…	0	0	4	2
Punctuation…	2	4	0	0
Word Division…	0	0	0	6
Mechanical Accuracy…	1	5	0	0

Spelling issues are shaded red

Of the four language constituents that affect learners' writing competency worst, 66.7% of the six teachers rated spelling (red shading) confusing. 33.3% of the six teachers rated spelling (red shading) very confusing. In both categories teachers concurred that spelling affects competency. Take note that the unhighlighted constituents of punctuation, word division and mechanical accuracy were decoys meant to conceal the survey's target constituent, spelling which is the mainstay of the study. It is believed teachers gave their honest responses unlike if the target constituent of spelling had not been concealed. It is concluded that spelling straddles the 'confusing and affects competence' and 'very confusing and affects competence very much' categories. This effectively shows that spelling affects writing competence negatively. Its effect is as high, as 66.7%

At the case school, Karanga dialect is predominant. Document analysis of learners' exercise books revealed that Karanga dialect word forms are not accepted in academic writing where the use of standard Shona is the norm.

Table 4 juxtaposes Standard Shona spelling and **ethnic dialect spelling** that is considered as wrong spelling as revealed by document analysis of learners' exercise books.

Table 4: Standard Shona Spelling and Ethnic Dialect Spelling

Correct Standard Shona Spelling	Wrong Ethnic Dialect Language Spelling
…aibura **h**uchi	…aibura **v**uchi [Karanga]
…akafamba **rw**endo rurefu	…akafamba **gw**endo **gwa**kareba[Karanga]
…nda**nzw**a ne**nz**ara handingambo**rari** …	…nda**hw**a ne**zh**ara handingambo**vati…** [Karanga]
…akazo**o**na kuti **h**upfu hwakapera…	…akazo**v**ona kuti **v**upfu hwakapera oda kupambira poto yake. [Karanga]

However, the meaning of the word is not changed or affected. This is caused by what this researcher proposes to call The Identity Orientation Group (**IOG**) of errors. Silver (2011) posits that dialect language is ill suited for academic writing. While a Karanga learner at the case school clang to his/her Karanga identity, phonological spelling errors were committed.   The mother tongue (dialect language) conspicuously interfered with the way he/she spells. The learner, code named **L**H confessed that,

"*I make many spelling errors when I write and fail composition. My book will be bleeding.*"

The spellings were considered wrong because they exuded Karanga dialect overtones. In any **L₂** learning there is rampant **L₁** interference.

L₁ interference also causes spelling failure. Participant Academic (**A₂**) explained that one of his best students lost many orthography marks and that disappointed him. The student wrote */wana/* instead of /*v*ana/. The academic considered that as wrong spelling. However, the academic

       "*…later realised that this student, when speaking says* **w**ana. *There is something that needs to be done to our orthography. It punishes students who should not be. Your dialect is your mother tongue, the language you think in, dream in, conceptualise things better in. Your mother tongue also reaffirms your esteem, your confidence, your identity, and your self-belief. You should also learn in it, but when you go to school, you learn another, a completely different language. This reverses the positives that characterise a mother tongue…*"

The interviewed teachers were code named Teacher A (**T**A) and Teacher D (**T**D). The teachers at the case school conceded that:
Teacher A (**T**A):

"*Home languages can cause errors, it's true. Some of the words they use at home should not be used when writing here. I can give an example of words like bwirira, svina, chigwere that are Karanga.*"
Teacher D (**T**D):
"*It is not easy for some students to separate being at home from being at school. As a result, they make some mistakes when they write.*"
Such confessions by some participating teachers show that mother tongue interference is rampant in academic writing. This negatively affects learners 'competency in language work. Something has to be done to make the orthography more accommodative and sympathetic to dialect phonologies.

This 'cruel' experience has learners like Learner E (**L**E) also making a clarion call that,
"*…why are we not allowed to write the way we speak to our parents and relatives at home? We never err in our speech.*"

Learner **L**H also confessed that,
 "*I make many spelling errors probably because of my mother tongue spelling.*"
The sentiments put together, mean that the school language phonologies and the home language phonologies are off-key. The atonality is a pedestal for phonological spelling errors.

Zimbabwean linguists clamor for the creation of an orthography that will please all speakers of different Shona language varieties living in different dialect zones (Magwa, 2007). It is quite reprehensible that these languages have been marginalized and pushed to the fringes of consciousness. There is need to move these dialect languages from the periphery to the centre of consciousness by incorporating and infusing their phonological, morphological and lexical characteristics into the orthography. If this is done, Magwa (2008) opines that combinations phonemes like /px/; /gw*/;* /xw/, /zh/ /x/, /g/ erstwhile excluded in the orthography can be encountered for Karanga. If the above listed phonemes are

used in spelling of Shona words, learners' spelling errors will be ameliorated particularly for Karanga learners. They will no longer be adjudged as penalisably incompetent spellers.

The phonemes /gw/, /zh/ /g/ and /x/ are widely used by the Karanga. However, their use in spelling words produces wrong spelling. Their wide use implies learners are more prone to committing a disproportionately large number of phonological spelling errors thereby shadowing their proficiency and competency in writing in the standard Shona language. The 'mother' that exists in all of us asserts that every word that resides in us is personal and partisan. Madusise (2023) submits that unless and until certain words from our Shona dialects are legitimized by orthography and policy decree, learners will continue making spelling errors of the phonological nature. This research argues for better changes in the day, so that we come up with an accommodative system of writing that tolerates dialectal differences in spellings of words.

It is a reality that two languages cannot coexist in a person and induce equal degrees of proficiency and competency. There is always unprecedented antagonism between the standard language and the dialect language. The antagonism and interference of a learner's mother tongue breeds errors (phonological spelling errors as concerns this research study). The errors that learners are likely to commit are borne out of habit formation. Habit formation is quintessential in language learning. Once the habits of a mother language are engraved in the mind of the learner, mother tongue interference is unavoidable because the mother tongue is formative of one's identity. It is quite difficult or next to impossible to avert the interference. A near exhaustive investigation of problematic aspects in language learning was attempted and spelling stood out as a problematic aspect in language learning. Table 5 below indicates learners' views about this. The yellow shaded column in Table 5 below is pertinent to this research. **38** learners out of **65** learners who responded to the question that solicited their view on language aspects that give them problems when writing in Shona indicated that spelling is the most problematic aspect. This translated to **58.4**% of the total respondents.

Table 5: Number of Learners Who Indicated that…

	Number of learners who indicated that…				
	Spelling is problematic	**Word division** is problematic	**Punctuation** is problematic	**Concordial agreement** is problematic	**All** of the above aspects are problematic
	‖‖ ‖‖ ‖‖ ‖‖ ‖‖ ‖‖ ‖‖ ///	‖‖ ‖‖ ‖‖ ‖‖	‖‖ //	65 Responses	0
TOTAL	38 **(58.4%)**	20 **(30.8%)**	7 **(10.8%)**	0 **(0%)**	0 **(0%)**

It is note-worthy that the adjective problematic circumscribes the degree of difficulty of each language constituent indicated in Table 5 above. This aptly demonstrates that the listed language constituents irrefutably pose writing challenges to learners with spelling (yellow shaded oblong) being the worst.

It is a desideratum that the Shona orthography must be reformed. Once reformed to accommodate the missing letters that are widely used by dialects other than Zezuru learners can be saved. This will make the orthography user-friendly to all who come from other Shona dialects. Their phonologies will be acceptable in academic writing, confirming Davis' (2005) Grain Size Theory that explains how phonology and orthography relate as indicated in Figure 4 below.
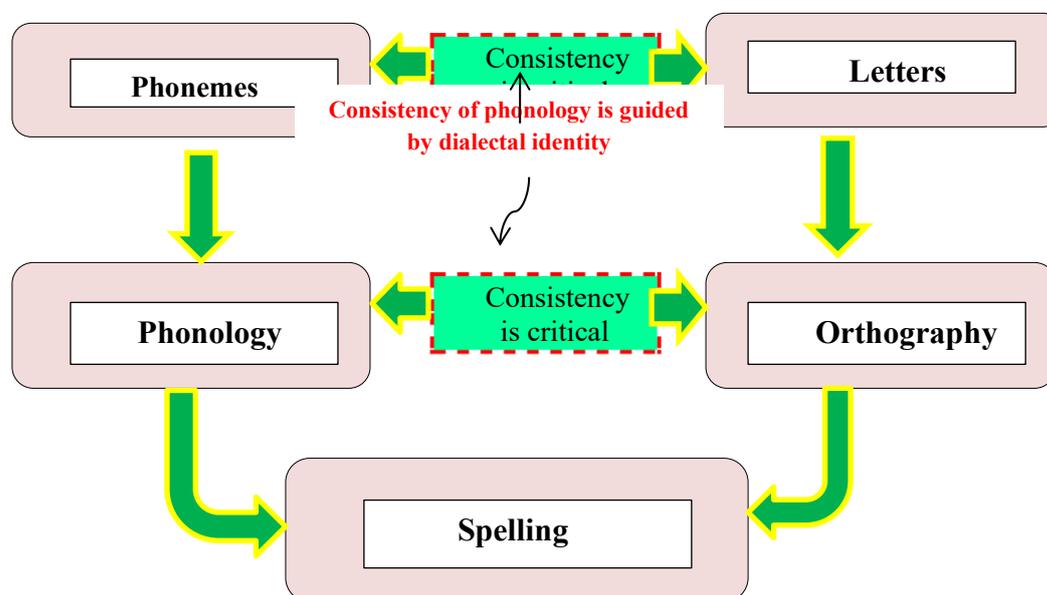

Figure 4: Grain- Size Theory by Davis, C. (2005)

Figure 4 shows how crucial it is for letters to correspond to phonemes. Phonology is the way the phonemes are pronounced.   The three components (phonology, phonemes, and letters) form orthography/spelling. Learners are most likely going to produce correct spellings because in shallow orthographies there is a one to one phoneme (sound) - grapheme (letter) correspondence. Put simply; the spelling of every word can be negotiated from its pronunciation. This is in tandem with Madusise's (2023) observation that Shona is a phonemic language where people should approximate sound to letter. In other words, learners should be allowed to write as they speak.

This also affirms Magwa's (1999, 2007) and Mazuruse's (2015) argument that people should write as they speak. To give credence to this claim by Magwa, (ibid) Mazuruse (ibid) and Madusise (ibid), the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe sanctioned the removal of the restrictions on the use of dialect phonemes ONLY in ZIMSEC Shona examinations by the 1982 Circular. This bears testimony to the fact that the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe is aware that not writing as one speaks affects one's competency in Shona spelling. It subsequently affects performance in 3159 O-Level Shona examinations especially so when standard Shona orthography conventions and dialect conventions are not in accord. Liberman (2008) argues that irregularities and inconsistencies of orthography and speech pose spelling problems to learners. Consistent use of letters in the orthography as guided by dialectal variances is critical. This accommodates dialectal phonemes and phonologies leading to competent spelling ability.

4. Pedagogical implications

Banda & Mwansa (2017) propose adoption of new pedagogical approaches that benefit multi-lingual and multi-cultural classroom discourses. The monolingual (Shona) discourse that still characterises Zimbabwean language education needs displacement and replacement. The heavy Zezuru bias in the Standard Shona Orthography that is in use in schools negates new pedagogical approaches suitable in multi-lingual or multi-cultural discourses. This can be achieved by reforming the Shona orthography and let it accommodate dialectal phonologies to suit new multi-lingual and multi-cultural classroom discourses. Learners' linguistic repertoires and cultural identities should be at the centre of consciousness rather than being peripheral in language teaching and learning. The approach is premised on the onerous notion of One Nation, One Language.

In 2003, UNESCO directed the development of a framework that encourages the use of mother tongues in education (Bender, et al., 2005). The use of mother tongues in education implies reforming and redesigning orthographies for the languages. Clifton (2013) argues that orthography, as a social construct, fosters identity and 'groupness'. Above all, it interacts with dialectal differences. A good one does not only interact with the differences, but strives to, by some good measure, resolve the differences.

This article entreats teachers to mark learners' written work assiduously so that they benefit immensely from the errors they make as they muddle through language learning intricacies and controversies. Strategies that focus on flawless academic writing should receive more attention from teachers should they wish learners to attain commendable levels of flawless academic writing.

By implementing the following strategies, learners can benefit from language education in schools as indicated in Figure 5 below:
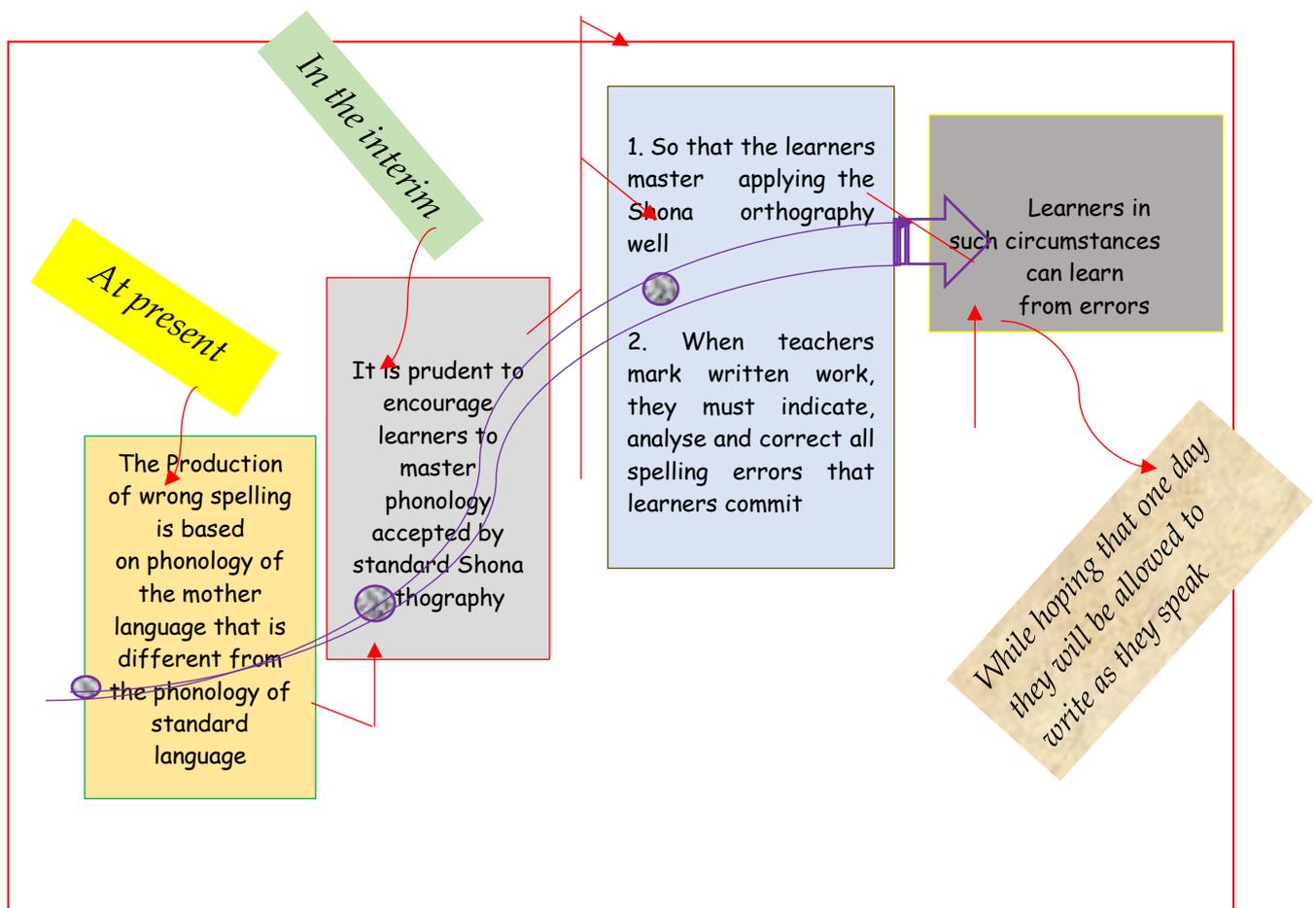
In the interim

At present

The Production of wrong spelling is based on phonology of the mother language that is different from the phonology of standard language

It is prudent to encourage learners to master phonology accepted by standard Shona orthography

1. So that the learners master applying the Shona orthography well

2. When teachers mark written work, they must indicate, analyse and correct all spelling errors that learners commit

Learners in such circumstances can learn from errors

While hoping that one day they will be allowed to write as they speak

Figure 5: The benefits of Committing errors that are corrected diligently

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5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study has outlined root cause of different types of phonological spelling errors learners commit when writing in Shona. As the paper indicated, learners' concerns about the Shona orthography were highlighted and discussed. Academics', teachers' and learners' concerns were also raised. These concerns have procreated the following recommendations

The study recommends ways to ameliorate the writing challenges that exist as far as the Shona orthography is concerned. It is recommended that the home languages should be used in school writing. The writing should spell speech. This study recommends assiduous marking of learners' pieces of written work through indicating or and correcting errors. Their competency and proficiency will improve.

5.2 Recommendations

It is recommended that mother tongue-based language learning should epitomise adequate funds of Shona orthographical knowledge in respect of the diverse Zimbabwean social and linguistic milieux. In this light, the Shona orthography must be reformed to make it dialectologically accommodative by respecting diversity. If that is done, teachers may be able to see beyond the learners' errors.

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