Recontextualisation of multilingualism in learners' graffiti in selected Zimbabwean secondary boarding schools

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Abstract

Different forms of cross-linguistic interactions in learners' graffiti in Zimbabwe have not received attention in empirical multilingualism research. Thus, this paper, part of a postgraduate study, explored the acts of codeswitching in the graffiti secondary school boarding learners in Zimbabwe. Seven secondary boarding schools were sampled for the study, providing valuable insights into the linguistic landscape of graffiti writing in these institutions. Employing a qualitative research design, graffiti inscriptions were collected exclusively from classroom walls and desktops. All the data were transcribed, paying particular attention to the source of the inscriptions from a locational linguistic perspective. The inscriptions were thematically categorised based on the specific linguistic features constructed. The study revealed instances of language alternation during different phases of graffiti communication, encompassing interactions between learners and teachers or other authorities, as well as peer interactions. Understanding codeswitching dynamics is crucial for optimising language use strategies and fostering a more effective communicative environment. This research underscored the need for a nuanced approach to subcultural interaction, acknowledging and leveraging the new multilingual era in graffiti writing. By recognising the role of these linguistic practices, educators may begin to understand that multilingualism in graffiti writing is a socially constructed phenomenon where languages are sets of resources rather than fixed linguistic systems. This study sets the stage for further research on the implications of codeswitching in diverse subcultural discourses within educational settings.

Keywords: Graffiti, multilingualism, code-switching, bilingualism, translanguaging.

Introduction

The study is anchored in sociolinguistic and discourse theories of multilingualism, particularly Gumperz's (1982) Interactional Sociolinguistics, Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, which interprets code choice as a negotiation of social identities and relationships, and Blommaert's (2010) Sociolinguistics of Globalisation, which highlights multilingualism as a dynamic resource for identity and resistance in unequal linguistic hierarchies. These frameworks guide the interpretation of graffiti as semiotic acts through which students claim voice and agency within the institutional constraints of schooling.

Studying different forms of cross-linguistic interaction in students' graffiti in Zimbabwe has never received attention in multilingualism research. Recent trends in the study of cross-linguistic interaction have examined codeswitching as an early acquisition of two or more languages, their functions, and their types in the classroom. However, very few studies, if any,

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have examined graffiti writing in Zimbabwean secondary boarding schools. This study, therefore, focused on how the concept of multilingualism has shifted from its original context to graffiti written by secondary boarding learners in informal spaces such as toilets, classroom walls, desktops, and dormitory walls in Zimbabwean schools. The discussion in the study transcended common negative stereotypes that characterise graffiti subculture, its members, and their perceived illegal activities as inherently problematic, pointless, and insane.

Makarati (2022) noted that multilingualism as a social construct is evident in learners' graffiti through codeswitching and is legitimised by the social groups in power, making it a more valuable form of symbolic capital worth research in institutions, particularly in education. Codeswitching in learners' graffiti in secondary boarding schools marks the onset of a multilingual era that characterises language learning and use in Zimbabwean schools.

Graffiti and multilingualism have been defined in psychology, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, sociology, ethnography, neurolinguistics, and linguistics in many ways, depending on the language of origin. The word graffiti originated from the Italian verb *graffiare,* which means *to scratch* (Olusoji, 2013). In this study, graffiti refers to illegal wall writings, pictures, drawings, and symbols that are scratched or scribbled in public spaces no matter what motivates the writer (Olusoji, 2013), or any kind of crude or casual drawings, slogans, inscriptions, or writing scratched or scribbled on buildings, walls, fences, or other public surfaces (Makarati, 2022). Furthermore, Mangeya (2014) presents graffiti as a term that can be defined in several ways depending on the 'loaning' language on which the definition is based. For instance, he argues that when defined from its Greek root, *graphein*, graffiti takes the meaning of a pictorial or written inscription on a publicly available surface. Thus, one may equate graffiti with any wall writing, drawings, pictures, and symbols illegally written in public spaces anywhere. Indeed, graffiti can be found anywhere one can draw or write, which suggests that it may exist across all cultures.

On the other hand, codeswitching is the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties in conversation, depending on the context in which a speaker is operating (Polat & Lange, 2025; Khoumssi, 2020). Aqilah (2020) echoes that codeswitching refers to the mixing, by bilinguals or multilinguals, of two or more languages in discourse, often with no change of interlocutor or topic. Such mixing may take place at any level of linguistic structure, but its occurrence within the confines of a single sentence, constituent, or even word has become the hallmark of students' graffiti not only in Zimbabwe but worldwide. Munna and Kalam (2021) argue that the intent of codeswitching might be to assimilate a person into a setting or to establish their legitimacy within it, in line with the setting's expectations. They add that very often, the question of what a setting requires comes down to power and privilege: a person in that space wants to speak or present themselves properly in the eyes of those responsible for it. This study, therefore, explored the scope of multilingualism and the different perspectives in which it can be recontextualised in the study of graffiti written by learners in secondary boarding schools in Zimbabwe.

Hamdan (2023) explained that in a multilingual context, like in Zimbabwean schools, shifting or mixing codes with other languages among the learners is a common practice, and this is typically called codeswitching. Moreover, code, in this case, means a system used for communication between two or more parties, which can be a language, dialect, style or register (Munna & Kalam, 2021). In fact, it is a strategy in the way speakers communicate with each other to achieve better understanding among them. This alternation of two languages is done within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent (Jamshidi & Navehebraim, 2013).This means speaking English as a language of instruction in Zimbabwean schools is essential, and using other indigenous languages is an advantage that is more valuable than being monolingual; hence, there is a need to use these languages to aid linguistic diversity and cohesion in graffiti writing.

Given the importance of knowing other languages, it is crucial to understand what a multilingual person means. Li (2008:4) defines a multilingual individual as "anyone who can communicate in more than one language, be it active (through speaking and writing) or passive (through listening and reading". A well-known definition of multilingualism is given by the European Commission (2007) as the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage regularly with more than one language in their day-to-day lives. Aronin (2019) adds an encompassing definition by stating that multilingualism symbolises the presence of several languages in one community of practice. It is the use of three or more languages and the ability to speak several languages" (p. 8). Hanafiah, Mono and Yusuf (2021) agree with the definitions and view multilingualism as the ability to speak or use more than one language. In this study, the concept of multilingualism is viewed as including all forms of multilingualism. The definitions of multilingualism are pertinent to discuss in this study to allow readers to understand what it entails, as the study discusses how it can be used as a resource in graffiti writing.

Secondary boarding schools in Zimbabwe have learners who are ethnically and linguistically divergent and have varied linguistic learning capabilities (Frederickson & Cline, 2015). They use graffiti as a common multilingual battlefield of social interaction in their communities of practice. They mainly mix English and Shona, where Shona is prevalent. Thus, graffiti is considered a method learners use, drawing on English and Shona as linguistic resources, to enhance social communication in the school. Research findings show that language use may involve codeswitching as learners negotiate meaning in social spaces (Levine, 2011).

While Zimbabwe has 13 indigenous languages, this study explored whether graffiti is written in indigenous languages compounded with English, enabling learners to produce globally relevant discourse with effective mastery of language skills. A study carried out in Zimbabwe by Makarati (2022) states that codeswitching in graffiti writing encourages learners of different cultural backgrounds to interact during the learning process and develop problem-solving skills. Codeswitching can offer individual learners the chance to curate how they present themselves or to protect themselves. However, it can also force marginalised groups to speak certain languages or dialects or present themselves in specific ways in spaces controlled by

dominant groups. Thus, in the process of social interaction, codeswitching is used as a learning resource since learners will be interacting with each other and with those in authority.

In Kenya, Okal (2014) found that one of the benefits of codeswitching in graffiti writing is that it can serve as a learning and communicative resource to help learners synthesise knowledge and express it accordingly. This may mean that it promotes interaction, which assists learners in easily communicating during social and cultural learning cohesion. Social interaction is an aspect of the communicative approach, which is a driving force behind graffiti writing in schools. For multilingualism to be productive in language use, learners are encouraged to contribute during interactions in the language they understand best. Nyamayedenga (2022) contends that the use of a learner's first language is an important multilingual tool that assists with the learner's speaking and writing abilities. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe (2014) stipulated that learning English should assist learners in using English functionally across different contexts. Therefore, graffiti has become one of the social interactive methods that assist learners in using language in real-life situations.

Despite the global growth of multilingualism studies (Blommaert, 2010; García & Wei, 2014), little research has examined how multilingualism manifests in informal literacy spaces within Zimbabwean schools. Existing literature has focused mainly on classroom discourse, leaving a gap in understanding how students use languages creatively outside formal structures. This study addresses that gap by analysing multilingual graffiti as a window into students' social and linguistic worlds.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive design, grounded in sociolinguistic and educational research paradigms of multilingualism. Qualitative methods were chosen because the focus is on unpacking the meaning, function, and context of multilingual graffiti, rather than measuring frequencies or generalising statistically. Qualitative approaches enable researchers to explore how language practices embed identity, power, and agency in informal student-generated texts, for example, in code-switching studies of multilingual contexts. Since graffiti is ephemeral, context-bound and meaning-rich, a qualitative design allows for rich description and interpretation rather than mere quantification.

The study was conducted in seven (7) mission secondary boarding schools situated in rural areas of Gutu District, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. These schools were purposively selected to reflect diverse learner backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, linguistic repertoire, and socio-economic status. As boarding institutions, the schools provide communal living spaces where students from different linguistic zones interact regularly, making them appropriate contexts for exploring multilingualism in informal graffiti.

Data were collected from graffiti found within classroom spaces and on student desks, specifically classroom walls and desktops in classrooms. These surfaces represent semi-public informal student spaces within boarding schools, more accessible and relevant for capturing peer-to-peer multilingual interactions than institutional signage or public town graffiti. These surfaces constitute visible, informal 'text-spaces' where students, anonymously or semi-anonymously, express thoughts, emotions, and peer discourse. Other spaces, such as bathroom walls and institutional notice boards, were excluded to ensure comparability of context; focus was on academic social spaces within classrooms to limit variation in spatial affordances. Strictly, graffiti items that contained multilingual elements, at least two distinct language varieties in a single inscription or cluster, were selected. Graffiti purely in English or purely in one vernacular language were excluded from the analytical corpus, because the study focuses on cross-linguistic interaction (codeswitching, translanguaging) rather than monolingual inscriptions. Where feasible, inscriptions were photographed (with school permission) or transcribed manually in a research notebook when cameras were not permitted or lighting was poor. The decision to focus on walls and desktops was purposive. Purposive sampling aligns with the study's aim to explore multilingualism items in graffiti; monolingual items were not accounted for since they would distract from the theoretical focus on codeswitching and translanguaging

From the seven schools, a total of 245 graffiti texts (35 per school) meeting the multilingual criterion were sampled via purposive and convenience sampling until thematic saturation was reached. School authorities granted permission and ethical clearance through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Zimbabwe). The inscriptions were anonymised. No attempt was made to identify individual writers or to link inscriptions to specific students. Thirty students per school participated in focus group discussions. Snowball sampling was effective among students who knew about graffiti, and it was conducted according to age groups. Groups were categorised into junior, O-level, and A-level students on their own. Participant voices (from focus groups or semi-structured comments) were used only to contextualise and illustrate the interpretive findings

The collected graffiti inscriptions were thematically and linguistically coded. Integrating linguistic form and social meaning provides coherence between the study's linguistic interest and its cultural and educational implications. Therefore, each inscription was read multiple times, noting language varieties, (English, Shona, and student slang), code-switching points (inter-sentential, intra-sentential), keywords, references to power, identity, authority, and peer relationships. These inscriptions were classified by types of language mixing using established categories, thus, inter-sentential switching (one sentence in one variety, next sentence in another), intra-sentential switching (language shift within a sentence), tag switching (single-word/phrase insertion). Inscriptions were further grouped under emerging themes such as expressions of resentment or displeasure toward authority; political consciousness; idolisation of personalities; expressions of affection; and codeswitching as a linguistic strategy. The interpretive analysis was cross-examined using sociolinguistic frameworks,

especially interactional sociolinguistics, the markedness model, and the sociolinguistics of globalisation model. The models explored how multilingual inscriptions enact identity, negotiate power, and create social spaces for peer interaction among students. To ensure credibility, the researcher and a second coder independently coded a subset of inscriptions and compared classifications. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved. Audit trails of photographs, transcriptions, and coding notes were maintained. Transferability is limited, given that boarding schools are in one district, but thick description enables contextualisation for other settings.

Findings

The findings in this study are presented in themes as shown next: graffiti to express resentment and displeasure, graffiti as a form of political consciousness, graffiti to idiolise certain personalities in society, graffiti to express affection, and graffiti as a codeswitching strategy.

Graffiti to express resentment and displeasure

Codeswitching in graffiti statements on classroom walls enabled students to express their resentment and displeasure over issues occurring at the school. Student discontent and disapproval were evident in the graffiti they wrote in the classrooms, especially where unfavourable decisions by those in authority were made. These contributed 21% of the collected texts. Most of the statements were not typically grammatical expressions, but they were mainly fragments described as simple or syntactically less complex, due to a lack of punctuation, as in the following examples:

Example 1:

Toda Party! (We want a party!)

Tajamuka! (We have revolted!)

Example 1 of codeswitching above includes using two different languages, Shona and English, within an utterance. This is realised as intra-sentential codeswitching, where the switching of either a single word or a tag phrase (or both) occurs from the Shona language to the English language. This type is common in secondary learners' graffiti and involves inserting a tag from one language into an utterance in another. Example 1 shows how native Shona-speaking students use boundary words like 'toda' (We want) when speaking English.

Commenting on the codeswitched inscriptions above, one of the participants in the focus group discussion in School A explained:

The above statements were directed at those in authority who had refused to throw a leavers' party for the Forms 4 and 6 students.

The analysis perceived that classroom wall graffiti offered discussion forums that can provide opportunities for students to codeswitch with content that invokes simulation of the student's cognition, student-to-authority and student-to-student interaction to achieve the intended desires.

Example 2:

Boardingmaster haasi bhudhi but thinks he's boss – zero vibes.

(The Boardingmaster is not clever but thinks he is the boss.)

Here, the switch from English to Shona softens the critique, allowing it to circulate within the student community while remaining opaque to non-Shona speakers. This supports Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, where code-switching functions as a strategic social act. Students use the local code to mark insider solidarity while distancing themselves from institutional authority. It might also be conceived that such expressions in the inscriptions are loaded with emotions and, in some way, threaten those in authority by telling them that they can do anything in the school. The two inscriptions are politically motivated discourse, typically associated with disgruntled individuals and discontent among groups in society. Such codeswitching in graffiti is a mere illustration of students' opinions and attitudes towards various revolutionary and non-revolutionary issues in the school. Codeswitching, in this case, mainly expresses resentment and displeasure, denial, and disapproval of authority-sanctioned issues.

Graffiti as a form of political consciousness

Nineteen percent (19%) of graffiti inscriptions collected contained indirect criticism of school authorities, and social structures. Students employed multilingual code-switching to mask dissent and minimise risk, expressing critique without direct confrontation. Example 3:

A: *Kurohwa kwemaform* one (The day the form ones were beaten thoroughly)

B: Third Chimurenga (Zimbabweans' third revolutionary movement)

A: Tinos

C: *Iweka,* leave me alone (You have to leave me alone)

The initiator in the dialogue remembers the day when the Form 1 group was beaten thoroughly, and speaker B is equating it to the ZANU PF's third revolution, where land was grabbed violently. The first speaker continues to nominate Tinos, probably as one of the Form 1 learners who was involved in the beating, but Tinos would not want to comment on it.

Example 4:

25 June kurohwa kwemaform one (25 June, the day when the form ones were t horoughly beaten).

Some codeswitching in graffiti inscriptions is conceived as a form of support for the commentary and documentation of sinister incidents in their school environment, where peers linguistically supply "tools" needed to critique them, as in example 4 above.

Such codeswitching in graffiti statements, expressed as memoirs, reflects on the meaning of specific significant moments and raises social awareness among other students, enabling them to understand life in the boarding school differently. Specific events, scenes, and complaint statements that students use to reflect their despair and express their resentment

are tools that scaffold remembrances worth sharing among peers. The statement might be defined as a piece of autobiographical inscription that articulates the names and dates of a painful encounter at school. However, the less frequent occurrence of such memory graffiti on classroom walls may be ascribed to the fact that bad and good memories are mostly recorded and that not all students like to be remembered by others due to the bad memories they experience during their academic journey. The analysis of the inscription about how the Form 1 students were beaten thoroughly might be perceived as a cultural diary on the classroom wall to be shared in a linguistically artistic form to be recalled by everyone who passes through that classroom.

The recognition of the active position of the victims is highly important as it is an essential part of teaching others in their zones of proximal development that wrongdoing in the school might be punished by caning. Such sharing of this kind of knowledge gives learners the opportunity to become independent thinkers, choosing to do good or bad in the future, considering the consequences. To achieve this, the characteristics of peer interaction in graffiti should be considered multilingually important. In Zimbabwe, corporal punishment was abolished in schools, but depending on the school's disciplinary policy, learners may be punished through caning.

Graffiti to idiolise certain personalities in society

Classroom wall graffiti has also featured codeswitching by social fanatics of national, international music and soccer as part of youth culture to idiolise certain personalities in society . This type of students' graffiti demonstrated that codeswitching in graffiti is an explanation of a wide realm of societal conduct. It might also be regarded as a creative way of getting their message out there, publicly displaying multilingual socialist and nationalist ideals. Though some seem to express support for some international flair in music and soccer, expressing patriotism is the most notable among Zimbabwean students, who are well known for their strong love, attachment, and support of their national teams and local artists. Some examples of social and national loyalty to music and sports were expressed through codeswitching in the graffiti analysis below.

Zimdancehall music has quickly gained popularity with most youth fans in Zimbabwean circles, and it has characteristics of America's hip-hop music. It seems Zimbabwean secondary boarding learners construct and share knowledge about celebrities and their songs and poetry, as in the following example;

Example 5:

> A: *Soul Jah Love. Chibaba-baba conquering Iwe hauite, hauite Television. Ting* high definition (Soul Jah Love is a godfather and a hardcore feature on television).
>
> B*: Marastar mese* will join the crew to the fullest
>
> (All Rastafarians must join the Zim Dance Hall music crew).

Codeswitching in example 5 allowed the speaker to convey more nuanced attitudes and emotions by drawing on a larger pool of words available to a bilingual person, much as one might use font, bolding, or underlining in a text document to emphasise points. The speaker in the above excerpt has expressed solidarity to build bridges between youth and to demonstrate, unconsciously, the multiple facets of youth's identity in the doldrums of Zim-Dance Hall music. Multilingual graffiti here, reflects emotional investment in self-expression, confirming Canagarajah, (2021) idea that language repertoires are emotionally charged resources. Students switch to mother tongues when expressing affection, frustration, or critique because local languages carry emotional authenticity. English, by contrast, connotes authority, education, and irony and is therefore used for commentary or humour.

It is imaginable that all students who codeswitch in graffiti writing create knowledge periodically. Without linguistic knowledge of celebrities and their songs, students' graffiti would be able to maintain itself as a functioning enterprise in the school. Saul Muzavazi Musaka, known as Saul Jah Love, had become a household name among the youths because he was a great code-mixing chanter, whose music influenced the generation. Graffiti has explained him as a "ghetto preacher" and a "ghetto teacher" whose message resonated with the youths. Commenting on his music, Participant 5 from the focus group discussion at School F said:

> Soul Jah Love was a ghetto teacher. He was a ghetto preacher whose music inspired a lot of youths. We listened to his music to get inspiration.

Through graffiti, the musician is praised not just as an ordinary musician but as a man who used his linguistic talent in code-mixing to teach, instruct and rebuke people. The songs Soul Jah Love sang touched almost every aspect of how ghetto youths lived. He sang songs that consoled people who had lost their loved ones, those who had lost hope and those who might have wanted to commit suicide, codeswitching English, Shona and Slang for easy access to everyone. The school youth identified with his songs because they captured their day-to-day lives in melody. In its linguistic diversity, Soul Jah Love's music was anchored on the daily struggles and victories of the ordinary ghetto youth. Talk of broken dreams, family problems, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, religion and evil spirits, which were common social factors affecting youths today.

Through the process of graffiti writing, new linguistic knowledge is yielded. New knowledge leads to the development of new linguistic capabilities for the students. Socioculturally, new linguistic knowledge about Zimdancehall music has been translated into the creation of new young artists from schools. An important area to locate and identify the linguistic knowledge being created lies in the graffiti's core function, which might perhaps be defined as the value chain activities, thus scaffolding students into becoming Zimdancehall artists. It is clear, therefore, from such graffiti inscription that the 'boshmaster' has played a pivotal role in uplifting most Zimdancehall talent from schools in Mbare and the whole country at large, among them Killer T, Seh Calaz and Kinna. Many youths admired his dexterity in

codeswitching and his chanting in schools nationwide, and this could partly explain why President Mnangagwa did not hesitate to declare him a 'linguistic' hero at his death.

The prevalence of codeswitching in students' graffiti in Zimbabwean secondary boarding schools, as chunks of lines and poetry, may also be attributed to an obsession with contemporary songs and poems, especially those performed by superstar singers and poets in Zimdancehall music. Repetition is a technique used for its musical impact and to attract readers' attention. It is becoming evident that graffiti endows them with the courage to explicitly profess their love and feelings for music. Thus, codeswitching in graffiti has become an important activity in creating knowledge of music in the classroom environment.

Graffiti to express affection

Students take the desk to become a site for romantic statements through sketches of hearts with names on them, besides romance poetry and songs to declare love, arrange romantic dates, and leave love memoirs. These constituted 13%. For example;

Example 6:

I luv u Qudzie

(I love you Kudzie)

Such love narratives in the form of graffiti, full of seemingly insignificant love details, facilitate the exchange of graffiti subculture practice and tacit experience among students who share the experiences within the classroom. This kind of social interaction enables students to collaborate in creating and transferring new interpretations of events in a way that facilitates the combination of different forms of knowledge, including those that are largely tacit.

Under the desktop category, tags are the most prevalent in the secondary boarding school context. These are mainly expressions written by those with a distinctive sense of humour and intended to elicit a smile from their target viewers —like themselves, friends, teachers, acquaintances, and loved ones. Certain words are spelt differently and codeswitched as an act of self-preservation or self-protection through which speakers present themselves in a context that feels intimidating or overwhelming in a way that feels safe or controllable. For example, students who speak both vernacular and English may slip between the two languages, using slang from one language or phrases from another in conversation. Meta-messaging, or the subtext of one student's actions and words, can either be actively or passively enacted, be interpreted actively or passively (and correctly or incorrectly) by others. For example;

Example 7:

Lv u zvakanyanya

(Love you deeply)

Most learners code-switch in graffiti writing with short content words that are functional to communicate ideas, intentions, emotions, and feelings, as well as to convey loaded messages. This prevalent codeswitching of short content words reveals the effect of social media writing

among students; thus, cultural linguistic learning and exchange take place through graffiti writing in the school. Though most of the texts were switch tags, how they were written was perceived as an invitation to love and friendship, which vented students' anxiety about being happier, more sociable, and better able to cope with challenges. For example;

Example 8:

I mic u Trey

(I miss you Try)

Some forms of this meta-messaging graffiti in Zimbabwean boarding schools were seen in how students transform and code-switch words in the shortest possible way. Here, students codeswitch within a single language by mixing dialects or vernaculars. They can mix academic-speak with street-speak, or slip mid-sentence into baby-talk.

Under the desktop category, tags are the most prevalent in the secondary boarding school context. These are mainly expressions written by those who have a distinctive sense of humour and hope to elicit a smile from their target viewers, like themselves, friends, teachers, acquaintances, and loved ones. Though most of the texts are switch tags, how they are written is perceived as an invitation to love and friendship, which eases students' anxiety about being happier, more sociable, and better able to cope with challenges. Some forms of this kind of meta-messaging graffiti in Zimbabwean boarding schools, as in examples 6, 7, and 8, are seen in the way students transform and code-switch words in the shortest possible way.

Graffiti as a codeswitching strategy

Numerous inscriptions revealed in-group humour, playful teasing, and coded friendship talk, showing language as a bonding mechanism to show peer solidarity and youth culture constituted 17%.

Example 9:

Haisi nyaya, no stress my bro – tiri tight.

(Its not an issue, don't stress brother – we're in support.)

Such phrases exemplify what Butler (2022) calls metrolingual creativity, in which youth fuse global English slang with local languages to build communal belonging. The mixing of languages not only signals peer solidarity but also demarcates generational boundaries where adult outsiders often fail to decode such blended discourse.

This sort of codeswitching sends a meta-message of loneliness and recognition. Alternatively, an individual who speaks English with an accent might work hard to limit it or dress in the traditional style of the company with which they interact. This sort of codeswitching is self-preservation, but largely to gain footing in a dominant group's world while protecting oneself. If an individual does not feel that their identity is safe within a context, they may choose to code-switch to protect that identity or to accrue power in that dominant setting.

Identity and Gender Negotiation

Another dominant theme, with 19% of the collected texts, involved gendered self-representation and peer discourse around relationships. Male students tended to use aggressive, humorous, or sexualised multilingual blends, while female-oriented graffiti revealed self-assertion and emotional commentary.

Example 10:

Ndirikuda freedom yevasiskana veform 1/We're no longer Manyunyu.
(I want freedom for the Form 1 girls, we are no longer newcomers.")

The earlier claim that masculine and feminine identities are constructed in students' graffiti is empirically grounded in the above statement, with specific linguistic choices—imperatives, pronouns, nicknames, and Shona slang —that reveal how students construct and contest gendered identities.

Example 11:

Boys manyaya/ Watch your space

(Boys you have gone too far/ Be careful)

Example 6 and 7 illustrate how language hybridity enables gender positioning. The vernacular asserts emotional immediacy, while English supplies ideological weight. This aligns with Blommaert's (2010) notion that multilingual practices reflect social positioning within unequal symbolic economies. Recent work by Canagarajah (2022), also confirms that translanguaging is a tool for identity performance in constrained social spaces.

Religious and Moral Commentary

Another group of inscriptions, which constituted 11% combined biblical or moral references with local idioms. For example;

Example 12:

Mwari knows – vanonyepa vanhu ava.

(God knows – these people lie.)

These blends show moral self-expression through hybrid language, indicating the coexistence of Christian moral discourse and vernacular emotional register.

Example 13:

Zvese in control, Mwari ndiye mufudzi

(All is in control, The Lord is our shepherd.)

Students thus use multilingualism to navigate conflicting moral codes within a restrictive school environment. This observation enriches the theoretical understanding of multilingual graffiti as heteroglossic texts (Pavlenko, 2020), in which multiple voices —religious, cultural, and institutional — coexist and contest one another.

Most learners code-switch in graffiti writing with short content words that are functional to communicate ideas, intentions, emotions, and feelings, as well as to convey loaded messages. This prevalent codeswitching of short content words reveals the effect of social media writing among students, so cultural linguists' learning and exchange takes place through graffiti writing in the school.

Discussion and conclusions

Therefore, the findings presented above support Pennycook's (2021) argument that literacy extends beyond classrooms into everyday performative acts of writing. Students' graffiti in Gutu District constitute an unofficial literacy practice, a space where multilingual competence is enacted without institutional sanction. Students use graffiti to experiment with language and identity, illustrating what Banda and Jimaima (2023) describe as the fluid, negotiated nature of postcolonial African multilingualism. The graffiti data presented and discussed above suggest that schools function as microcosms of Zimbabwe's broader sociolinguistic dynamics, where multilingualism reflects social stratification, resistance, and hybridity. English maintains symbolic capital, while local languages carry emotional and cultural resonance. The interweaving of these codes in graffiti demonstrates students' negotiation of both institutional and vernacular identities. As Banda and Jimaima (2023) observe, African youth linguistic practices are inherently translingual, reflecting sociocultural tensions between colonial legacies and postcolonial agency.

Codeswitching in graffiti to show resentment and displeasure in examples 1 and 2, reveals that graffiti could be perceived as resistance to the existing school authorities' decisions and as tributes to the revolution. This kind of switching between languages or dialects depends on who the individual is speaking to. Such a discussion forum on the classroom wall includes student-to-teacher dialogue, student-to-student exchange of ideas, information, and dialogue among peers, using an intra-sentential collaborative switching approach, and students with linguistic content materials. What is of the essence in this inscription is that all interactions, including interactions with content, peers, and those in authority, occur through the interface of the classroom wall. Thus, the sociocultural theory emphasises interactive learning to achieve meaning using a collaborative linguistic approach.

Examples 3 and 4 also reflect the students' dominating political thoughts of the scourges of political violence over the struggle for leadership and a depiction of their people's suffering in the current economic crisis in Zimbabwe. Thus, students collaborate to use boarding school walls as political forums where they speak out their views, approve and disapprove decisions, and approach political matters through multilingualism without fear. This finding lends support to Whitford's (1992) finding that codeswitching in graffiti is an effective option used as a medium for the manifestation of political disillusionment or defiance. Chaffee (1990) concurs that codeswitching in graffiti-writing is one of the easiest and most effective ways for people and groups to voice their political nonconformity, social alienation, and anti-system thoughts. Thus, these examples reflect the learners' ability to communicate their thoughts,

emotions, and opinions to others through codeswitching in graffiti, a truly remarkable skill. Not only does their language communicate who they are, but their cross-linguistic style can also influence their self-concept and linguistic capabilities, as supported by García & Wei (2014). It goes both ways; cultural influences are reflected in their language and influence how they conceptualise and politicise who they are and where they come from.

Content analysis of classroom graffiti in all seven secondary boarding schools in Zimbabwe has obtained comprehensive and extended data on learners' engagement and knowledge construction through codeswitching. Thus, Vygotsky (1978) argues that linguistic learning is a process of social construction in which the individual adds new information to a constructed understanding and knowledge. As students interact with their environment, they absorb linguistic information and transform it into knowledge. For meaningful discussion to occur, graffiti that collects memories of adolescent school life, reflexively constructed by both boys and girls, has enabled codeswitching interactions in social learning environments. Realising the importance of multilingualism in producing higher knowledge construction, codeswitching in classroom graffiti has enhanced students' achievement and produced critical thinkers about the aesthetic taste and cultural artefacts in which subcultural memories are inscribed (Canagarajah, 2013).

The immense space in the classroom also equips learners with multilingual subjectivities and multilingual reflexivity on how individuals are shaped and shape themselves, as well as on their conduct towards self and others regarding cultural and linguistic relations. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasises that an effective learning environment should involve interaction between three macro components: students, teachers and content. The argument is that this interaction will develop individual learning experiences on a deeper level of new linguistic construction. As such, the current study perceived that codeswitching in classroom graffiti revealed a deeper and more meaningful interaction occurring among learners and teachers, learner and learner or learner and the graffiti content that exists at a high level. This analysis focused on dialogues and discussions on walls and desks in a hybrid classroom. According to cultural prescriptions that demand individual development, as supported by Bakhtin (1981), learners' school life is modelled as a certain new being through the interpretation of the immediate linguistic and social milieu, where they mix with others and create shared awareness.

For example, one youth commented in a newspaper that:

> *We thank the President for giving him hero status. We have been robbed of a true role model who inspired many youths. I thank the government and President Mnangagwa for recognising the late Soul Jah Love's work and for making him a hero. It will inspire us, as youths, to continue serving our country, as we will be recognised for our contributions to its development. The Herald, 18 February 2021*

Indeed, he deserved the honour, just as his late compatriots, Dr Oliver "Tuku" Mtukudzi and Simon "Chopper" Chimbetu. It is through graffiti, therefore, that youths reckon the linguistic death of Soul Jah Love as leaving a big void in the local music industry. The granting of hero status to Soul Jah Love is an acknowledgement of the works of young people in the furtherance of the national ideology through music and a befitting gesture that their contribution is not in vain.

Soul Jah Love's death robbed the nation, particularly youths, of one of its talented young musicians who pioneered the production and promotion of Zimdancehall music from the high-density suburb of Mbare to national prominence. He emerged from a crop of youngsters hungry for success in the music industry, blending Jamaican-influenced reggae beats with Zimbabwean-style lyrics that resonate with the experiences of youths across the country. He will be sorely missed by his legions of fans and the entire music fraternity in Zimbabwe. The conferment of the hero status has changed in form and context over the years, no longer limited to those who played a part in the liberation war alone, but also to those who actively advocated for linguistic emancipation and the liberation of people in post-independence Zimbabwe. Thus, codeswitching is real linguistic emancipation, joy, and appreciation. ZANU PF takes note of this joy, appreciation, and pride among the young people and the generality of Zimbabweans across the divide following the declaration of Liberation Hero status on music icon, Cde Soul Jah Love (Soul Muzavazi Musaka). Under the National Heroes Act, the President considered that any deceased person who was a citizen of Zimbabwe and wished well for his country on account of his outstanding, distinctive, and distinguished service to Zimbabwe may be designated a national, provincial, or district hero of Zimbabwe.

Scientists consider individuals who can code-switch linguistically to be users of multilingual or multi-dialect languages, for instance, "*love*", "*luv*", "*lv*"; "*miss*", "*mic*", "*mc*"; "*You*", "*u*" in example, 5, 6 and 7. Here, students codeswitch within one language by mixing dialects or types of vernaculars. They can mix academic-speak with street-speak, for example, or slip mid-sentence into baby-talk. These subcultural meta-messages are shared on desks and are written in such a way that one word is transfigured using numerous spelling codes. The tendency to switch loanwords could signify the dominance of some English terms over Shona. They could also be a result of the impact of technological advances and the language used for WhatsApp, SMS texting, and social media communication, indicating a cultural transformation from old formal writing to new forms of technological linguistic advancement. Codeswitching in examples 5, 6 and 7 appears in the form of sentences, texts, words, sometimes numbers, drawings, symbols, signatures, and logos that play a prominent role in the construction of knowledge.

Similarly, Pennycook (2007) claims that these cultural and linguistic variations in classroom graffiti reflect learners' mental, physical, or emotional reactions to pleasure and pain, as well as their experiences throughout their school lives. For learners, the depiction is mainly about secondary life's challenges and happiness. This implies that the subculture in the classroom

can be seen as a way of alleviating the pressures and anxieties of boarding school life. Thus, codeswitching in classroom graffiti presented freelance communication of the major secondary boarding-oriented matters that mirror controversies that learners and school authorities deal with at a given time. While some of them poke fun at teachers and fellow learners, others ridicule the institution's educational and administrative management and procedures. Pietrosanti (2010) contends that the prevalence of codeswitching using short words in graffiti writing implies that the reader will lexically broaden them to appropriately interpret their intended meaning.

The concept of language mix in students' graffiti subculture presented in the findings focuses on the centrality of shared beliefs for social cohesion, contested by both boys and girls, reflecting a linguistic social mix where masculine and feminine identities are constructed, as advanced by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) and Norton (2000). Through social relations in the classroom, examples 9, 10, and 11 reveal that learners' graffiti crosses sexual boundaries and is acquired and recalled in interaction among both boys and girls, more often face-to-face and sometimes mediated through cultural artefacts. Some express allegiance to God as in example 12 and 13 which demonstrate that school graffiti operates as a vibrant communicative ecosystem that mirrors the multilingual realities of Zimbabwean students. Rather than being random acts of defacement, these inscriptions constitute deliberate, creative engagements with language, power, and belonging. Through code-switching, students construct layered meanings that reflect both their lived linguistic repertoires and their socio-religious consciousness. This confirms García and Wei's (2024) assertion that translanguaging is not merely a linguistic practice but a cognitive and ideological process through which speakers navigate and reshape social worlds. In this sense, students' graffiti revealed how multilingualism becomes a tool for agency, enabling critique, humour, and emotional release within constrained institutional spaces.

Thus, learners' experiences are shared in intermediaries, such as different mixed linguistic forms of graffiti texts, oral traditions, and drawings on the walls and desks in the classrooms, as reported in a study by Ibrahim (1999). This uniqueness and oddness could be ascribed to a multilingual medium of communication that is intended to effectively communicate personal development to peers and those in authority.

The study's findings, discussions, and analysis showed that graffiti serves as a distinctive, silent form of communication in boarding schools, particularly among students. Codeswitching in graffiti in secondary boarding schools in Zimbabwe is a learner's way of voicing feelings, ideas, and attitudes towards certain social, economic, political, and personal concerns. Through graffiti writing, serious learner-oriented personal, and sociocultural issues such as memories, friendships, power, intolerance, competition, happiness, boredom and desperation, among others. Findings from this research have also revealed that learners collaborated in codeswitching and the exchange of linguistic knowledge in their zones of proximal development, making linguistic education among students part of the discourses on

classroom walls in all secondary boarding schools. Thus, the research has conceived learners' graffiti as a discourse with discursive structures and functions that have demonstrated its sociocultural phenomenon.

Depending on the context in which it is used, codeswitching from the study's perspective has emerged as either a tool of empowerment or an unfair expectation that disenfranchises a marginalised group within a space. It is significant in that it shows the extent to which learners perform in a certain way or match the expectations of a dominant group. Scientists view individuals who codeswitch as multilingual or able to engage in multi-dialect language use, meaning that those who can codeswitch are highly skilled and capable thinkers and speakers. The prevalence of codeswitching and its potency in learners' graffiti mark a new era of multilingualism in applied linguistics. Overall, learners' graffiti could be perceived as an extension of their linguistic, social, cultural, academic, economic, and political lives in school. Consequently, it seemed valuable and essential to acknowledge and explore the importance of codeswitching in graffiti as a mode of communication, its functional representation, and its underlying messages. The research, therefore, concluded that codeswitching in learners' graffiti takes many forms, functions, and linguistic implications, depending on the social context of the individual student at a particular institution. Such findings suggest that learners' graffiti can be perceived as reflecting some underlying ideologies of Zimbabwean society and has become a highly creative, positive medium for students to explore cross-linguistic roots, affirm their identities, and promote the ideas they believe in. It mirrors and reflects the sediments of dominant linguistic beliefs in Zimbabwean secondary boarding schools.

Conflict of interest

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