

The impact of local language instruction on lower primary school learners in Chitokoloki, Zambia.

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Abstract

Zambia, a multilingual nation, faces the challenge of selecting an appropriate language of instruction in schools due to over 70 languages spoken within its boundaries. In response to this linguistic situation, Zambia has developed an educational framework that emphasizes the use of familiar local languages as a medium of instruction from grade one to four in public primary schools. This research investigated the impact of mother tongue-medium of instruction on pupils' quality of learning in Zambian primary schools. The study engaged 22 teachers from selected public, community, and private primary schools and 20 parents of Chitokoloki zone in Zambezi district. The research found that mother tongue-medium of instruction portrays pupils' ethnicity and national identity better. The acquisition and application of skills are also more efficient when taught and explained in the learners' mother tongue. Moreover, learners in public schools that use mother tongue instruction perform better in practical subjects than their counterparts in private schools where English is the medium of instruction.

Keywords: *Mother tongue, medium of instruction, ethnicity, local language, language policy.*

INTRODUCTION

Prior to independence, the present-day Zambia experienced two types of administration: First as a territory under the British South African Company (BSA) and second as a protectorate under Britain. The BSA Company introduced English as the official language for the territory and as a medium of instruction in some mission schools under their control (Chanda, 1998). Mission schools outside their control as well as indigenous schools such as the Barotse National School used both English and the local language (Silozi) as medium of instruction. This period can be said to have marked the beginning of a less formalized language policy with regard to the medium of classroom instruction for present-day Zambia.

In 1964, Zambia attained independence from Britain, and like all newly independent states it had to deal with the matter of a national language. "At independence, African countries needed to select a language or language that could serve the needs of national unification that could enhance the myth of historical identity that was spoken by some significant segment of the population and was acceptable to other population segments." (Kaplan and Baldanly,

1997:7) This statement suggests that language was seen as a resource that could be galvanized to meet the nation's needs, both immediate and long-term, without compromising national unity. It must be noted here that in many African countries, languages of instruction came from overseas. These languages of instruction in African schools include English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Afrikaans. The choice of which of these languages could be used in a particular country was very much dependent on colonial legacy—the influence of the former colonial masters. There are, of course, some countries in Africa who use indigenous languages as medium of instruction but only at elementary level. This is principally because most of the countries in Africa have many languages, except a few such as Rwanda, Burundi, and Somalia where people speak one language throughout the country. (Mukama, 2007). In a multilingual situation, such as the one most African countries find themselves in, it is only fair that a neutral language is used as medium of instruction to avoid tribal conflicts. These neutral languages are languages of former colonial masters such as Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal. Makama (2007) further argues that "It would be very ambitious, even superfluous to reduce the

complexity of African languages to one single language used in one single nation.” It must be noted, however, that the use of these foreign languages has had a negative impact on the quality of education given to an African child. As Brock-Utine observes, “quality of education cannot be separated from the important question of which language should be used for education.” Language plays a significant role in the learning process and if the learner is handicapped in language use, then learning may not take place at all. Wolf (2006, p.9) correctly indicates, “Language is not everything in education but without language, everything is nothing in education.” It is clear from the above argument that it is the language the students and teachers have to use to negotiate meaning in the classroom setting and beyond. Developing the above argument further, Tell (2014:10) argues, “There is a strong relationship between the medium of instruction and the quality of education in a country’s education system. He stresses that learners can only participate actively in knowledge creation if they are allowed to use a language they understand, especially the one used in their day-day life.” Underscoring the above argument, Obanya (1980:88) makes the following observation:

It has always been felt by African educationist that the African child’s major learning problem is linguistic. Instruction is given in a language that is not normally used in his immediate environment, a language which neither the learner nor the teacher understands and uses well.

Since independence, the Ministry of Education has constantly recognized the role of languages in education when formulating and reviewing national educational policies. This is evident in the 1966, 1977, and 1996 education policy statement and documents. In this regard, the focus of language policy in Zambia has centred much more on language in education which is supposed to be just a component of the overall language policy in the overall language planning process (Mwape, 2002). Commenting on the issue of language in education or medium of instruction, Coombs (1985:256) contends thus:

The issue of what language or languages to adopt as medium of instruction at successive levels of education is one of the pedagogically most difficult and politically explosive political issues faced by schools in great many countries. Paradoxically, however, the choice of language of instruction is one of the least appreciated of all the major educational problems that come before international forums.

Since language policy formulation and implementation in Zambia has been closely linked with education policy, it is important for us to consider some of the pedagogical factors that have contributed to the language policy formulation and implementation in Zambia over the years by examining three major landmarks in language in education policy formulation and implementation. The three are the 1966 Education Act, the 1977 Education Reforms recommendations, and the 1996 Education policy document on which much emphasis shall be placed.

The 1996 Language in Education policy is contained in the publication, Ministry of Education (1996) document; **educating**

our Future, the document states that “school leavers find it difficult to communicate confidently in speech or writing, be it in a Zambian language or in English.” (MOE, 1996:27). This statement suggests that the language in Education policy formulated in 1966 and reiterated in 1997 that English be used as the sole medium of instruction from Grade One to University might not have yielded the expected results.

One of the expectations of the Ministry of Education’s Basic Education Programme as outlined in the 1996 policy document was that every pupil, upon completion of Grade 9 should attain a suitable level of competence in the communication skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing in both English and a Zambian language (Simwinga, 2007)

The policy further stated that “A fundamental aim of the curriculum for lower and middle basic classes was to enable pupils to read and write clearly, correctly and confidently, in a Zambian language and English, and to acquire basic numeracy and problem-solving skills, the level of achievement to be attained would be such that those who leave school are able to function effectively in society, while those who continue in school should have an adequate basis for further education.”(Kashoki, 1985)

It acknowledged that the use of English as medium of instruction from Grade One had impacted negatively on the performance of children who have been required to learn how to read and write through and in the language which is quite alien to them. Underscoring the above point, Obanya (1980:88) makes the following argument:

All the attention of African policymakers should be devoted to a strengthening of the African languages as languages of instruction, especially in basic education. The concept of “education for all” becomes a completely empty concept if the linguistic environment of the basic learners is not taken into account. Having English (in the so-called Anglophone), French (in the so-called Francophone), or Portuguese (in the so-called Lusophone countries) as languages of instruction does not promote understanding of what is learnt in the majority of schools in Africa.

It is clear from the above quotation that the quality of education cannot be separated from the important question of which language should be used for Education, It is unfortunate that donors to education in Africa seem to focus more on the learning outcomes as opposed to supporting the development and use of the most appropriate language of instruction and literacy from the learner’s perspective. In most African countries, instruction is given in a foreign language while children and teachers alike speak African languages. The foreign language, in most countries the language of the former colonial masters, and in Africa often called the ‘national language’, is a language neither pupils nor teachers master well and do not speak outside school. Commenting on the subject of medium of instruction, Bamgbose (2005:255) correctly makes the following observation:

Outside Africa, no one questions why the language of countries with smaller population in Europe should be used as medium of instruction, even up to and including the university level. What seems to be lacking in many African countries is the political will to break away from the colonial policy and practice of limiting mother tongue education to lower primary classes. Where such a will exists, a lot much can be done in a short period of time.

The practice of using a foreign language as a medium of instruction was said to have contributed to children's inability to read completely and is said to have promoted rote learning since from the outset the child has difficulties in associating the printed form of words with their real underlying meanings. The 1996 policy document, **Educating Our Future**, acknowledged research findings that supported the use of local languages as media of classroom instructions. It stated that "Children learn literacy skills more easily and subsequently they are able to transfer the skills quickly and with ease to English or another language. Successful first language learning is, in fact, believed to be essential for successful listening in a second language and for learning contact subjects through the second language." (MOE, 1996).

In recognition of the critical role of the mother tongue in facilitating education MOE (1996) states that "all pupils will be given an opportunity to learn initial basic skills of reading and writing in a local language; whereas English will remain the official medium of instruction." Developing the above point further, Simwinga (2007) argues that by developing the use of a local language for initial literacy acquisition, Children's learning of essential reading and writing skills should be better assumed. Utne, (2014) highlights the above point further by observing that there seems to be general agreement that children learn better when they understand what the teacher is saying

The 1996 policy document also places emphasis on community languages rather than the seven officially recognised languages as was the case with the 1977 policy. This stance has brought confusion in some areas of North Western Province among the Luvale and Lunda people, each wanting to be recognized as the language to be used as medium of instruction in schools from grade 1 - 4 forcing some schools to use English as medium of instruction instead.

It must be noted, however, that Zambia, just like many African countries, has been grappling with which language to use in Zambian education without stirring tribal sentiments. In 2018, Zambia reverted to using zonal local languages as medium of instruction from grade 1 - 4 in all government schools. The main objective of this study, therefore, was to establish the effect of using local languages as medium of instruction at lower primary-grade 1-4 on the performance of learners.

1. METHODOLOGY AND THE DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREA

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed a descriptive study design. In this design qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were blended so as to provide the researcher with relevant and accurate information.

2.2 TARGET POPULATION

The population for this study comprised and not comprised of the District Resource Centre Coordinator, Zonal Inset Coordinator, Headteachers, and teachers in public primary schools, and parents in Chitokoloki area of Zambezi district. In other words, all the people who were at the center of the main research objective were engaged.

2.3 STUDY SAMPLE

The sample for this study comprised 49 respondents. These were divided as follows: 7 head teachers, 15 teachers from public primary schools, 4 teachers from community schools, 2 teachers from a private school, 1 inset coordinator, and 20 parents whose children were learning in these schools.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

The sampling technique employed in this research was purposive sampling, this refers to a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected because they have characteristics that you need in your sample. It is also called judgemental sampling, meaning that it relies on the researcher's judgment when identifying and selecting the individuals that can provide the best information to achieve the study's objective. In other words, units, individuals, or cases are selected on purpose.

The researcher purposively targeted the teachers who teach in lower primary classes and parents. Basing his judgment on the reliability and suitability of the respondents for the study. Therefore, the choice of 21 teachers were made based on the fact that these were teachers who taught pupils in lower primary school and they understood the effect of using local languages as medium of instruction on primary school learners.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION

The study used questionnaires, interviews, group discussions, and observation as research instruments. The questionnaires had both open-ended and close-ended questions. The close-ended items were limited to predetermined set of choices while some of the close-ended items had provisions for the respondent to expand on the questions other than the choices given. It was expected that this approach would capture any useful information that a given option might have failed to capture. The open-ended items on the questionnaires enabled respondents to give responses in their own words. The questionnaires were distributed to teachers to enlist information on the views as regards the use of local languages as medium of instruction at lower primary level of education. Interviews were conducted with parents whose children were learning at the selected schools. The purpose of the interview was to establish the parents' views regarding the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at lower primary level. Furthermore, the researcher observed learner participation in the leaning process when the two different media of instruction were used.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher sorted out the filled questionnaires and the data that were collected through interviews. The data collected from questionnaires were quantitative while the one collected from the interviews were qualitative. The researcher then tallied and related the information gathered from different respondents. The categorised data were then transferred to the computer sheet prepared by the researcher with the assistance of a computer specialist. Descriptive statistics and some inferential statistics were used to analyse the data and present them in form of frequency tables, percentages, graphs, and graphs where applicable. Furthermore, data collected through the questionnaires were analysed by the use of the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software. Processing of the data that were collected through interviews was done through categorizing similar items into themes and subthemes in relation to the research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
THE DOMINANT LOCAL LANGUAGES USED AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

One of the objectives of the study was to identify the most dominant language used as the medium of instruction at lower primary level in Zambezi district. In order to understand the most dominant local language used as medium of instruction in Chitokoloki zone of Zambezi district, the researcher visited the District Resource Centre Coordinator (DRCC) and the Zonal Inset Coordinator for Chitokoloki zone. The DRCC explained that Zambezi district is divided into two constituencies, namely Zambezi East and Zambezi West. Zambezi East is led by Chief Ishindi of the Lunda people while Zambezi West is led by Chief Ndungu of the Luvale people. Despite this artificial boundary created by the Zambezi River, the Lunda and Luvale-speaking people have intermarried and so the Luvale people are also found on the eastern side of the Zambezi River which is a predominantly a Lunda speaking area. As regards the selection of the zonal familiar language in Chitokoloki zone, the DRCC had this to say:

When the government introduced the use of a zonal familiar language as a medium of instruction. Zambezi west picked on Luvale as medium of instruction in schools on the west bank while schools on the east bank were to use Lunda as zonal language.

According to the Zonal Inset Coordinator, out of the eight schools in Chitokoloki zone, only three use Luvale as medium of instruction, the rest use Lunda. Therefore, the local language used as medium of instruction in most schools in Chitokoloki zone which has five schools in the east bank and three schools in the west bank is Lunda. In other words, Lunda is more dominant than Luvale as far as being used as a medium of instruction is concerned.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

The table below shows the statistics of the schools and their respective languages used as media of instruction.

S/No	SCHOOL	LANGUAGE USED AS
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		MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION	
		LUNDA	LUVALE
1	CHITOKOLOKI PRIMARY	✓	x
2	MAYENG'U PRIMARY	✓	x
3	NYAMONGA PRIMARY	✓	x
4	CHIHONGO PRIMARY	x	✓
5	KAYULA PRIMARY	✓	x
6	KAKOLOKOKU PRIMARY	✓	x
7	LIKUNGU PRIMARY	x	✓
8	KAULA PRIMARY	x	✓
TOTAL SCHOOLS: 08		5	3
PERCENTAGE		63%	37%

The table above shows that out of the eight schools of Chitokoloki zone of Zambezi district, five representing sixty-three percent (63%) use Lunda as medium of instruction from grade 1-4 while three representing thirty-seven percent (37%) use Luvale as medium of instruction. This shows that Lunda is more predominantly used as the medium of instruction in Chitokoloki zone of Zambezi district than Luvale.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

In this study teachers were drawn from different school categories namely; government, community, and private schools. About seventy-three percent (73%) were drawn from government schools, eighteen percent (18%) from community schools, and nine percent (9%) from private schools. The socio-demographic variables are categorized as school types, age group, grade taught, and gender. The results on the socio-economic factor of the teachers that participated in the study are summarized in the table below.

1. Table 2 showing the socioeconomic factors of the teachers that participated in the study.

SCHOOL TYPE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
GOVERNMENT	16	73%
COMMUNITY	4	18%
PRIVATE	2	9%
AGE GROUP		

20-30	4	18%
31-40	12	55%
41-50	6	27%
GRADE TAUGHT		
1--4	16	73%
5--7	6	27%
GENDER		
MALE	10	45%
FEMALE	12	55%

Seventy-three percent (73%) of the teachers that participated in the study were from government schools, nine percent (9%) from private schools, and eighteen percent (18%) came from the community schools. Therefore, the highest number of teacher participants came from government schools.

The highest number of teachers came from the age range of 31-40 years. This represented 55%, while the representation from 20-30- and 41-50-years age groups were 18% and 27% respectively. As regards gender, 45% were male and 55% were female teachers.

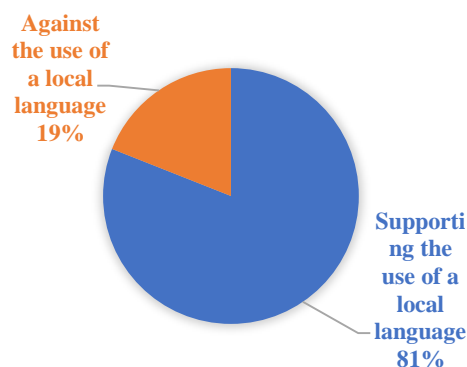
The respondents were then asked various questions regarding the advantage of using a local language as a medium of instruction in relation to one of the objectives which sought to establish the advantage of using local languages as medium of instruction in Zambia primary schools.

TEACHERS' SUPPORT FOR THE POLICY OF USING THE LOCAL LANGUAGES AS MEDIA OF INSTRUCTION AT LOWER PRIMARY LEVEL

When teachers were asked whether or not they supported the policy of using local languages as medium of instruction at lower primary level, most of them (81%) indicated that they supported it while 4 representing 19% did not support it. This clearly shows that teachers have a positive attitude towards the use of a local language as medium of instruction during the formative years of education. The above observation is further consolidated by Heugh (2002:171) who argues that "linguists and language researchers have emergent awareness that mother tongue education is more effective than bilingual or second language medium of instruction."

The pie chart below shows the teachers who supported the use of a local language as medium of instruction in lower primary and those against it.

Pie Chart showing the percentage of teachers who support local languages as medium of instruction and those against it.



When asked to state the reasons why they supported this language policy various reasons were given both in the questionnaire and during Focus Group Discussions. The reasons included freedom among pupils in class discussions, teachers finding it easy to explain some concepts in content subjects, reduced rote learning, and increased interest in school in general. Supporting the above observation given by the teachers, Theresa and valerio (2015) make the following observation:

One major common driving force behind the policy of mother-tongue-based instruction (MJB-MLE) multilingual education is common belief that elementary students can learn faster and better if they are being instructed by their teachers using their respective dialects which they initially learnt at their respective homes.

They further argue that the Childs' linguistic background is the foundation of his cognitive ability.

PUPIL PARTICIPATION IN CLASS LESSONS WHEN LOCAL LANGUAGE IS USED AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

In an ideal classroom situation, learners are expected to take the centre stage while the teacher is supposed to play the role of facilitation. When asked if using mother tongue (Lunda/Luvale) led to increased participation during lessons 86% of the teachers argued that the use of mother tongue instruction freed the pupils from timidity. It led to active participation in the classroom. This seems to be in conformity with Garbes (2012) who argues that "by starting with the language that leaners speak at home, the gap in understanding can be bridged better and easier, hence elementary students can better absorb lessons."

COMPARISON IN LEARNERS' CONCEPT ASSIMILATION WHEN ENGLISH OR LOCAL LANGUAGE (LUNDA) WAS USED AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

One of the objectives of the study was to compare the performance of the leaners before and after the introduction of a local language

as medium of instruction. When asked if they noticed a difference in concept assimilation when Lunda or English was used as medium of instruction, most respondents affirmed that there was a notable difference. 18 respondents representing 81% said there was increased assimilation of concepts in subjects like science many others when home language was used as medium of instruction. This was against 4 respondents, representing 19% who indicated that they didn't notice any improvement. This clearly shows that learners assimilate and understand concepts better when a local language is used as medium of instruction. The above argument is further developed by Bell (2010) who make the following observation:

Some researchers conclude that becoming fluent in one's first language is important for overall language and cognitive development as well as academic achievement. Evidence from India and Mali, the Philippines, South Africa, Vietnam, and elsewhere attest to the benefits of learning in a familiar language. First children learn to read faster if they speak the language of instruction because they already have the cognitive basis of vocabulary, knowledge of constructions of utterances and the ability to enunciate the sounds of the language.

CONCLUSION

The question of which language should be used as medium of instruction is very critical and yet it is the least appreciated of all the major educational problems that come before international forums. Donors to education in Africa seem to focus on learning outcomes but they do not see that in order to improve learning outcomes particular attention must be paid to the support and development of the most appropriate language of instruction from the learner's perspective. It is important to appreciate the fact that quality education cannot be separated from the important question of which language should be used for education. There seems to be general agreement that children learn better when a familiar language is used as a medium of instruction. In Africa, this is not the case. Instruction is given in a foreign language, while children and teachers speak African languages. The findings of this study have revealed that it is more beneficial to use a familiar local language as medium of instruction in the formative years of a child's education. When children are taught in a familiar language or mother tongue, they freely express themselves during class discussions and they easily remember what the teacher has taught them. Additionally, mother tongue instruction enhances fast literacy and speeds up learning of content subjects. Finally, there is excellent class participation when children are taught in local familiar language.

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