

## Original Paper

# Harnessing the Potential of Indigenous Language Instruction in Zambian Lower Primary Schools: A Comprehensive Examination

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Received: May 16, 2023

Accepted: June 29, 2023

Online Published: July 06, 2023

doi:10.22158/wjer.v10n4p16

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjer.v10n4p16>

### **Abstract**

*This study examines the impact of using local languages versus English as the medium of instruction in Zambian primary schools. It focuses on grades one to four in selected schools in Livingstone District, following the policy change to promote local languages. Using a case study approach, both qualitative and quantitative methods are employed, with data collected through questionnaires. The sample includes 50 participants (pupils, teachers, and administrators) selected randomly. SPSS and Excel are used to analyze the collected quantitative data.*

*Findings reveal that Zambian children face similar challenges in learning to read English as those learning a new language. Language divergence between the learner's dialect and the instructional dialect significantly affects learning and reading difficulties. The greater the divergence, the harder the learning process becomes. Bridging the gap between vernacular-speaking children's existing language forms and those found in reading materials and teacher instructions is crucial, particularly during initial literacy instruction. The study presents compelling evidence supporting the use of local languages as the medium of instruction instead of English.*

### **Keywords**

*Local language, Medium of instruction, Lower primary school, Effectiveness, Learning*

## **1. Introduction**

The role of languages as a medium of instruction in promoting an effective teaching and learning is an issue that has to be tackled with the seriousness it deserves. Zambia's education system has undergone

some changes which have roots in the pre-colonial era. It was envisaged that the changes would bring about effective teaching and learning. To have a clear understanding of the language policy obtaining in schools, this chapter will look at language policy from pre-colonial to the post-independence.

During the period 1882 to 1905, there was a lot of missionary activity which led to the establishment of several mission stations throughout Zambia. These mission stations established western education. The first school was introduced in the territory of King Lewanika of the Lozi people. The providers of this education system encouraged the use of a local language as a medium of instruction to teach pupils from Sub A to Standard Four (Chaondoka, 1999). Snelson (1974), points out that there was no formal training for teachers by then. The natives that learnt the three Rs took up the challenge to teach their fellow indigenous people. However, English was introduced in higher grades/classes, starting at standard five as an additional subject. It was the missionaries who first reduced some local languages to written form and translated the Bible into a number of local languages. The translated Bibles and other texts written in local languages served as the first teaching and learning materials for teaching literacy in local languages. The local African languages were used as media of instruction as well as school subjects (Snelson, 1974). By 1924 when the British Government assumed direct responsibility for the administration of the protectorate, a fairly widespread education system had been established.

Kashoki (1978) explains that, before then, Zambia had no clear language policy since pre-colonial days. The policy on language has been somehow experimental ever since. This has led to the challenges against the fight for illiteracy among primary school children who fail to break through to literacy in a Zambian language and English by the time they are in grade two. The British Government set up the Phelps-Stocks Commission in 1924 in order to examine the educational system in its colonies. The commission conducted a study of the education system of East, Central and Southern Africa and made some recommendations on the way educational institutions should be run. Among these recommendations some were made specifically to do with language teaching (Ohannesian, 1978).

i) It stressed that the ways of preserving the African Cultural heritage ideas, ideals and the self-identity was by teaching of African languages. As such the commission saw language as a right. African languages were to be taught in lower grades at primary schools starting with a mother tongue and then moving into an African lingua franca.

ii) A lingua franca of African origin be introduced in middle grades in the area occupied by large native groups speaking diverse languages.

iii) The commission also stressed the importance of teaching European languages; English inclusive. They saw this as offering many opportunities and advantages to the Africans. European languages were seen as a means of acquiring information and uniting Africa with the great civilisations of the world (Ohannesian, 1978). These were to be taught in upper grades of primary school.

In 1927, following these recommendations, the advisory Board of Native Education of Northern Rhodesia, made a decision to use four local languages as media of instruction in the first four years of primary school which were Sikololo (Lozi) in Barotseland, Chitonga-chila in North-Western Rhodesia,

Cibemba in North Eastern Rhodesia West of Luangwa River and Chinyanja North – Eastern Rhodesia east of the Luangwa (Ohannessian, 1978). The Advisory Board by 1930 noticed that there was no single vernacular in Northern Rhodesia which could be used as a lingua franca for Africans. It was decided wherever there were teachers qualified to teach in English it should be used as a medium of instruction after the learners had acquired the mechanical skills of literacy. There was basically no departure from the practice of the missionaries, in that a mother tongue was used in the first two years of primary schools and then a dominant regional lingua franca (Silozi, Chitonga, Chinyanja & Cibemba) was taught up to the fourth year, in a case where the mother tongue was different from the lingua franca. This practice continued into the Federation years after 1953. Schools for Africans which were referred to as unscheduled schools, used English as a medium of instruction after the fifth year of primary education while scheduled schools for Europeans, Asians and Coloureds used it from first year of primary school. There was, however, increased calls for the introduction of English much earlier in primary schools such that by 1956, English was being taught as a subject in the second year of primary school in some unscheduled schools.

By 1962, English had found its ways into the first grade (Mwansa, 2013). Just before independence, the demand for English especially by the settler community became more insistent and as a result UNESCO was requested to study the educational system and make recommendations. The Commission led by Dr W.C. Radford, recommended that English be introduced as medium of instruction from the first grade of primary schools, thus the English Medium Policy (UNESCO, 1964). This policy was, in 1961 considered in Northern Rhodesia Legislative Council after a motion was moved that English should be the main teaching medium in African schools from standard one (now grade 3) onwards. In response, the then Minister of African Education stated that the ideal medium of instruction in the first four (4) years of primary school is the mother tongue, while the main African languages of the territory, namely Chitonga-chila, Chinyanja, Cibemba and Silozi would continue to be used as a medium of instruction (Ohannessian, 1978). In 1965, the newly independent Zambia introduced English as a language of instruction in all schools from grade one on the advice of the Minister of Education Mr J. M. Mwanakatwe, though it allowed for continued use of the Zambian language mediums of instruction for Grade 1-4 in all unscheduled schools. It was finally enacted into the 1966 Education Act. This act which according to Kelly (1999), just “schooled” illiterates graduated from primary schools because initial literacy was done in English, a language completely alien to most pupils. The outcome of this language policy shift was quite predictable because there was minimum improvement in pupil performance in numeracy (Zambia National Assessment Survey Report, 2003).

Teaching in local language has made learning easy where learners enjoy lessons and have confidence which led to good results at the end. Though this may not always be the case since not all pupils are familiar with the language that is being used and some words and concepts may not easily be understood by both teachers and pupils. Since local language is now being used as a medium of instruction there is high concentration by the learners in classes thus improving the academic standards

of learners in the nation. Many people are now educated because they are taught skills in their local language.

Records indicate that enrolment levels have also increased during this period when using local language as a medium of instruction was introduced. From the focus group discussions, it was found that learners appreciate school because they are able to learn effectively and participate in many academic activities. Teaching is done from known to unknown and there is no language barrier. Furthermore, high performance during examinations leaves the teachers not only proud but also happy because the gap between pupils who normally performed badly in class and those who performed very well was reduced. Once sound foundations for literacy are laid, it is much easier to move from the known to the unknown again, this time literacy is known, and English language is relatively unknown. The phonetic idiosyncrasies of English can be taught more easily once learners are familiar with basic phonic rules. Additionally, teaching and learning materials must be printed in local language for all grades unlike the situation at hand there are no books printed in local languages for grades 3 and 4 so teachers use English books which makes it more difficult for them to teach especially those that do not know the given language.

## **2. Method**

The chapter focuses on the methodology of the study. It discusses the following research methods: Research Design, Target Population, Sample Size and Sampling Techniques. The discussion also includes data collection techniques, data processing techniques, ethical consideration and limitations of the study.

### *2.1 Research Design*

A descriptive survey design was used to carry out the study. In the study both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in order to collect detailed information on the challenges of using local language in a multilingual setting. The design involved the use of questionnaires, semi-structural interviews, in depth interviews and focus group discussions.

### *2.2 Target Population*

Livingstone district is a district of Zambia, located in Southern Province. The capital lies at Livingstone, Zambia. As of the 2000 Zambia Census, the district had a population of 103,288 people. Its border with Zimbabwe is formed by the Zambezi River and Victoria Falls. Although most people live in Livingstone, other villages include Jinga Jinga in the north and Simonga in the southeast.

**Table 1. Population of Schools in Livingstone and Their Classification as either Government, Private or Community**

1	Acacia International School	Private
2	Chaba Primary	GRZ
3	Cheshire Homes	Grant Aided
4	Chileleko	Grant Aided
5	Chimilute Trust	Private
6	Christ The King	GRZ
7	Dambwa Christian Trust School	Private
8	David Livingstone Memeorial Presbyterian	Private
9	Ebenezer Trust School	Private
10	Father Hugh Memorial	Private
11	Great North Road Academy	Private
12	Highland Creative Academy	Private
13	Highlands Basic School	GRZ
14	Holycross	GRZ
15	Indeco Community	Community
16	Libala M. Basic	GRZ
17	Libuyu	Community
18	Linda	Community
19	Linda East Primary	GRZ
20	Linda West Basic	GRZ
21	Little Lambs Pvt	Private
22	Lstone Primary	GRZ
23	Maanu Mbwami	Community
24	Mahululo Primary	Grant Aided
25	Malota	Grant Aided
26	Maramba Basic	GRZ
27	Maranatha Basic	Grant Aided
28	Messiah Junior Pvt	Private
29	Mopani Kindercare pvt	Private
30	Mother Eve	Private

*Source:* MOE, 2013.

The target population for this study were school teachers and pupils. The researcher targeted teachers that teach Grades 1 to 4 who as predicted provided rich and professional information about using a

local language as medium of instruction. The pupils targeted were from Grades 1 to 7 though the largest number was from Grades 1 to 4.

### *2.3 Sampling*

A random sample of 5 schools was selected from the population of 30. Random numbers were generated in excel and from the selected sample of schools, a sample of 10 pupils were selected and interviewed in terms of their learning experience as regards the introduction of local languages. This was done to ensure that there was validity in the findings and that the sample of pupils was representative.

### *2.4 Data Collection Techniques*

Data was collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

### *2.5 Data Processing Techniques*

Quantitative data collected was analysed using SPSS. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. Using the across-case approach, the researcher was able to organize multiple responses from different respondents and generate given thematic areas. Tables and charts were used to summarize numerical data.

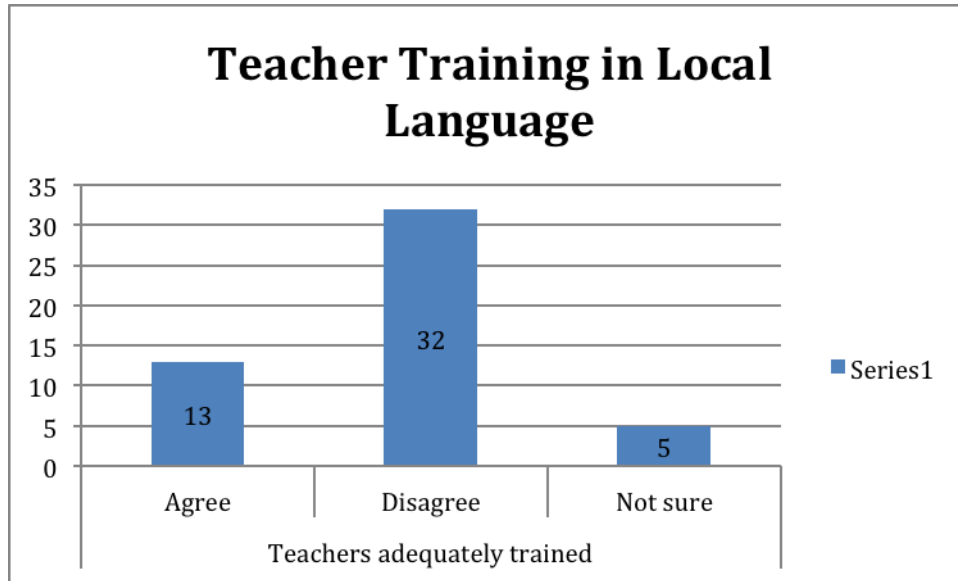
### *2.6 Ethical Considerations*

All ethical considerations such as seeking permission from school authorities, issues of confidentiality were taken into account as well as not using the data for any other purpose other than the reason for this study. Respondents were assured that no information relating them direct to the study was collected and that all information was for academic purposes only.

## **3. Results and Discussions**

### *3.1 Teacher Training in Local Language*

Out of the 5 schools sampled, 3 were Government run and 2 were privately run. In establishing the effect of teaching in local language on pupil's academic performance, the teachers were asked if they were trained to teach in local in their colleges. The responses are shown in the Table below:



**Figure 1. Revealed Respondents Views on Teachers Training at College Concerning Using Local Language as a Medium of Instruction in Primary Schools**

Source: Survey.

Out of hundred percent, 13(26%) said teachers are adequately prepared to teach in local language while 32(64%) said teachers are not adequately prepared to use local language as a medium of instruction from grade one to four while 5(10%) indicated that they were not sure.

### 3.2 Cost-Effectiveness

At the moment, there is no scientific evidence, which demonstrates that in the medium to long term: the use of African languages in education is more costly than the use of the former colonial languages; or that the use of the former colonial languages is more cost-effective than the use of African languages in education. Considering the evidence available, however, it is clear that in Africa, we continue to invest in programmes, which are designed to fail. This is most definitely neither cost-effective nor economically wise. It is therefore necessary to change from a dysfunctional approach to one, which may offer a good return on investment. You learn only what you understand. Without changing the language used to teach, basic education can be neither effective nor efficient. Language difficulties result in higher dropout and repeater rates that cannot be reduced (World Bank, 2011). The study found that the number of dropouts had drastically reduced as shown below;

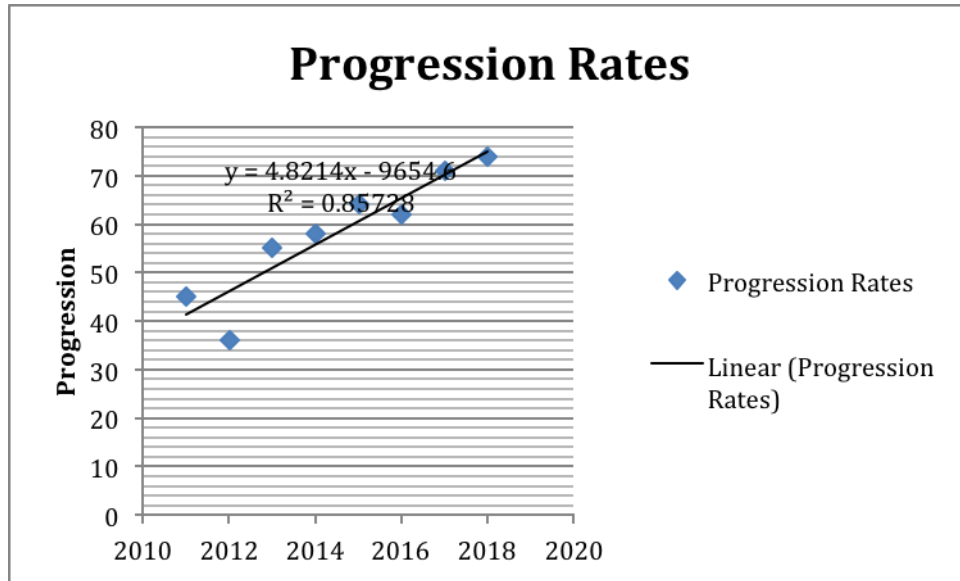


Figure 2. Showing Positive Responses on Effect of Teaching in Local Languages

Year	Progression Rates
2011	45
2012	36
2013	55
2014	58
2015	64
2016	62
2017	71
2018	74

Source: Survey data.

There was a perceived trend of increased rate of progression from G1 to G4 on average from all the schools sampled. This can be attributed to the fact that pupils were finding it enjoyable to learn in the local languages as it strongly came out from focus group discussions.

The study pointed out a number of perceived effects of teaching in local language on pupils’ academic performance which include easy understanding, participation Increase by learners, teaching has become pupil centered, high level of concentration, easy to teach, easy to clarify things, performance has increased, higher academic standards, and learners’ confidence has increased.



### 3.3 Literacy Levels as a Result of Using Local Language

**Table 1. Respondents Views on Literacy Levels**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	2	4%
Very good	10	20%
Good	36	72%
Bad	2	4%
TOTAL	50	100%

*Source:* Survey data.

The Table above reveals respondents views on literacy levels as a result of using local language as a medium of instruction from grade one to four in primary schools. Of the 50(100%) administrators interviewed 2(4%) said the literacy levels were excellent, 10(20%) said that the literacy levels in schools were very good, while 36(72%) said that literacy levels were good and 2(4%) said that the literacy levels were bad.

The outcome of this study seems to suggest that teaching in local language follows the firm education principle of teaching from the known to the unknown (M.O.E, 2001). In this case the language is known while literacy skills are the unknown. Literacy skills are at the most basic level about understanding the sound, symbol relationships that form the phonic rules of a given language. This is much easier if these sounds and symbols make up words with which a learner is familiar. Literacy skills are at the most basic level about understanding the sound, symbol relationships that form the phonic rules of a language. This is much easier if these sounds and symbols make up words with which a learner is familiar. A set of symbols called letters is used so the alphabet is a group of symbols, which stands for speech sound.

While phonic is the relationship of sounds and letters. It helps the learner to make the link between what they hear and what they see in print. Phonics is one way in which we teach children how to read. Children learning to read must be taught the major phonics rules in the first years (1-4) of instruction. Each language has its own rules for this. If learners know these rules then they can sound out new words they have not seen before and they can try to write words without having to remember all the words by sight (Fry, 1965). Zambian languages are phonetically very regular much more so than English. For example once a child knows how to read aloud a word with the letter “a” in it, he will know how to read the letter “a” in any other word as well. English is different; vowels can combine with each other or with consonants in different ways to give at least twenty (20) vowel sounds. For example the “oo” sound in the wordbook sounds quite different from the “oo” sound in the word door although both words are spelled with “oo”. English has irregular forms as well, like the words bed and bird have the same vowel sound but have different vowels. For this reason learners will find it easier to learn and apply phonic

rules in Zambian language in the first instance.

Since Zambian languages are phonetically based whereas English is not, the syllabic method of teaching local languages does not work so well with English. Pupils will be left confused if they are forced to transfer new literacy skills in such an ineffective manner as early as grade 1. Hence more time is needed to teach literacy in the local languages, “Let us allow the local languages enough time of 2 to 4 years in order to consolidate initial literacy. Thereafter, English can take over as medium of instruction”.

Prediction based on picture and meaning cues is an important teaching and reading skill. Therefore, a learner cannot use these cues unless they are familiar with the language they are using as the medium of instruction. Learners feel more confident and therefore, respond better to learning if that learning is taking place in a language with which they are familiar. They easily communicate to each other and to the teacher teaching them. This helps both teachers and pupils to express themselves fully and clearly. Learning should be a fun process that learners choose to engage in but learning and reading for enjoyment will not take place if the learners cannot understand the language being used as the medium of instruction (M. O. E, 2001). Parental support will be more forthcoming when learning is taking place in a familiar language. Even illiterate parents can support their children learning development if they understand the language in which the child is reading and writing. Parents can also participate in their children’s learning by helping them in homework, assignments and projects.

Teaching in local language has made learning easy where learners enjoy lessons and have confidence, which lead to good results at the end. Though this may not always be the case since not all pupils are familiar with the language that is being used and both teachers and pupils may not easily understand some words and concepts. Since local language is now being used as a medium of instruction there is high concentration by the learners in classes thus improving the academic standards of learners in the nation. Many people are now educated because they are taught skills in their local language.

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#### 4. Conclusion

The study pointed out a number of perceived effects of teaching in local language on pupils' academic performance which include easy understanding, participation increase by learners, high level of concentration, easy teaching, good performance, higher academic standards, and learner's confidence increase. It has also been revealed that learning in local language has more advantages than learning in English at the early stages. This is so because English has irregular forms and some words with the same spelling sound different. The Zambian languages phonetic are regular hence gives an advantage for fast reading. Children enjoy learning and reading something they can easily understand. Stakeholders can give support to learners if they learn in a language that they too understand.

However, serious challenges have been revealed on the implementation of the local language policy. They include congested classrooms, limited physical facilities and shortage of qualified teachers, which negatively affected the quality of teaching and learning on one hand and contributed to indiscipline in schools on the other. Zambia is a multilingual country; so teachers teaching in one part of the country may not be very conversant with the language being used hence have a negative effect on their teaching. While on the other hand some pupils may also not know the language that is used as a medium of instruction so it has a negative impact on their academic performance. If only the local language could be used to teach reading and writing skills not used as the medium of instruction to teach in all subjects because it has serious negative impact for example some words have no proper translation more especially when the teacher is using an English text book as it is the case now since books are not written in local languages.

#### Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to Chabota and Kubota Hamaluba for their valuable contributions in collecting data for this research study conducted in Zambia. We extend our sincere appreciation to the teachers in Livingstone who participated and shared their insights, making this study possible. We would also like to acknowledge the support of SCHOLINK INC. for sponsoring the publishing space for this research article. Their generosity and commitment to promoting scholarly work are greatly appreciated.

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#### Notes

Note 1. Funding: The editorial board of Scholink supported this article's publication.

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