

The Positive Impact of Using Local Language as a Medium of Instruction in Primary Schools in Zambia

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Abstract

This article is an extract of one of the objectives from the Master study entitled “The impact of teaching in local languages: a case study of selected primary schools in Chipata District, Eastern province of Zambia”. The background of this study is anchored on the poor literacy levels of primary schools from grade one to four as a result of using a foreign language (English) as a medium of instruction. Now that primary schools have introduced local language as medium of instruction, this study assessed the academic performance of pupils in primary schools especially from grade one to four in selected primary schools of Chipata District. In achieving this task the study employed a case study research design which adopted both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. Data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires for all respondents. The sample comprised of 50 participants. A simple random and purposive sampling procedure was used to select pupils, teachers and administrators respectively. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data while STATA and excel was used to analyse quantitative data. The study therefore revealed that an African child learning to read in English will face the same problems as an individual who is learning a new language. Language divergence is a crucial factor in learning and reading failure among school going children. The more divergence there is between the dialect of a learner and the dialect of the learning the more difficult will be the task of learning. The vernacular speaking child has to make correspondence between the forms he already controls both receptively and productively and the forms found in primers as well as those used in teaching and reading instructions by the teacher. These differences in forms may be the most crucial for beginning literacy instructions during which the child is supposed to learn how to “crack the code”. Therefore, this study gave more valid reasons as to why using local language as a medium of instruction is better than using English as a medium of instruction. The following recommendations emerged from the study.

(1) The government through the Ministry of General Education should build many schools to cope with this increase in enrolments. (2) The government through the Ministry of General Education should print the books and other materials in local languages for easy teaching and proper use of words. (3) The government through the Ministry of General Education should increase the funding to primary schools to meet the needs of the primary schools. (5) The government through the Ministry of General Education should train teachers in colleges on how to teach in local languages. (6) The government through the Ministry of General Education should retrain teachers in local languages so that they can teach effectively. (7) The teacher should be able to speak three to four languages so as to help implement local languages in schools.

Keywords: academic performance, literacy, local language, teaching and learning

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

The education system in Zambia has undergone some changes which have roots in the pre-colonial era. According to Chondoka and Manchishi (1999) ^[1], western education was first introduced to King Lewanika’s territory of the Lozi people by the white missionaries in 1883. These architects of the education system encouraged the use of a local language to teach pupils from Sub A to Standard four (4) by teaching vernacular as a subject and using it as medium of instruction. Snelson (1974) ^[15] states that there was no formal training for teachers though some natives who had learnt the three Rs took up the challenge to teach their fellow indigenous people. English was however, introduced in higher classes as an additional subject. This language policy scored considers able success as the teaching of initial literacy was conducted in children’s mother tongue which enhanced learning gains and cognitive development in learners.

The colonial period commenced in 1924 and extended up to 1963 during which period Northern Rhodesia was directly

ruled by the British government. The Phelps-Stocks Commission was setup by the latter in order to examine the educational systems in its colonies. The commission visited East and Central Africa and the following were its specific objectives: ‘to investigate the educational needs of the people in the light of their religious, social, hygienic and economic conditions; to ascertain the extent to which their needs were being met; and to assist in the formation of plans to meet the educational needs of the native races, (Snelson 1974:134) ^[15]. The Phelps-Storks Commission recommended that primary education in the colony should be relevant to the practical needs of rural Africans and in particular Northern Rhodesia. In the same vein, it irrevocably recommended the use of vernacular language in the lower primary years of school. Shana (1980:5) ^[14] reports that, ‘the board proposed that four vernacular languages, Tonga, Bemba, Lozi and Nyanja were to be taught in schools for Africans.’ He further states that 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. Most white missionaries continued

running their schools while maintaining their curriculum and language policy towards the natives.

By 1953 the language policy was that from Sub A to Standard two a local language most familiar to learners (mother tongue) was used as medium of instruction whilst teachers used the most dominant local language to instruct learners from Standard three to four. English was later introduced at Standard five through to upper levels. Kelly (1999) ^[6] states that vernacular was used as medium of instruction and was accorded more periods per week on average and taught at lower primary more than any other subject. Northern Rhodesia (1930:3) ^[13] supports this argument that, 'Mother tongue-instruction would be used to teach the mechanics of reading and writing and that English instruction would replace the use of mother tongue thereafter.' In the same vein, it can be argued that the use of indigenous languages to prepare teachers to deliver initial literacy during the early years of lower primary education was recommended.

After independence however, there was a drastic turn in as far as language policy was concerned as political and national unity was prioritized by new African political leaders. The 1966 Education Act pronounced English as the sole official language in Zambia. Kelly (1999) ^[6] reports that English was used as medium of instruction to children in all grades who hardly used it at home and if they did it was imperfect. The outcome of this language policy shift was quite predictable because there was minimum improvement in pupil performance in numeracy.

The majority of citizens from various sections of the Zambian society have expressed their concern about the declining levels of reading and writing. It was clear that though pupils were physically in school, they had no access to learning due to their inadequate reading ability (Ministry of Education 1999). The Ministry of Education in 1995 initiated a major research study under the auspices of Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring of Educational Quality (SACMEQ). The report for SACMEQ was published in 1997 and its main findings indicated that, 'only 25% of grade 6 pupils could read at minimum levels and only 3% could read at desirable levels.' It was clear that pupils could not read materials of their grade levels.

The Ministry of Education in its efforts to improve the literacy levels among Zambia's school children convened a National Reading Forum (NRF) in 1995 which led to the development of a Primary Reading Program. The Ministry of Education (1996) ^[10] education policy 'Educating our Future' revived the use of a familiar language to teach initial literacy to grade (1) one pupils.

Despite all these efforts by the government, not much has been achieved in terms of raising literacy levels among basic school pupils. Matafwali (2005) ^[8] in her studies in four randomly selected schools in Lusaka Province confirmed low reading levels among grade three pupils. She states that only 23% out of 106 pupils were able to read at a level expected for their level. Matafwali (2010:161) ^[9] also indicates in her findings that while reading is at the core of educational experience however, a good number of Zambian children are reading below the expected grade level. She concludes that, children's poor oral language abilities have been identified as the underlying factor explaining difficulties in the development of literacy skills observed among Zambian children even when

powerful effects of intelligence, alphabetic knowledge and background factors are taken into account.

"One Zambia, One Nation" was the motto adopted when Zambia gained independence from the British in 1964. This motto highlighted the people's desire to become a unified nation after being disintegrated during the colonial period (Marten and Kula, 2007) ^[7]. Following the belief that "one nation equals one language," Zambians adopted English as their only official language. Although Zambia has identified seven national languages, English still remains the official language and was the only language recognized in the 1991 Constitution. English is used in official governmental activities and has been the main language of instruction in Zambian schools. The majority of Zambians, however, are multilingual. Banda and Bellononjengele (2010) ^[2] argue that complex multilingualism is an essential part of Zambian identity and communication. In order to not lose the linguistic resources available to Zambians, the roles local languages play need to be examined more carefully and protected. In particular, the role of local languages in education is crucial since schools are a primary site for the implementation of language policies and can have a strong effect on the overall vitality of a language. This study therefore aims to investigate the impact of teaching in local languages on pupils and teachers in Zambia's education sector.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although the issue of teaching initial literacy in local languages has been under discussion and extensively researched for some time, it was not known which initial learners read better, those taught by indigenous or non-indigenous speaking teachers of the local language that is used in teaching initial literacy. There was a general concern raised in Zambia regarding the quality of education being offered to young learners. This was evidenced by low achievement levels in reading and writing skills among learners. Schools should not produce functionally illiterate pupils. There are some unknown factors leading to the problem which need empirical research. The problem therefore is: little is known about the impacts that teaching in local languages has brought in Zambia's education sector to both the teachers and pupils.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study was of great significance for it seeks to generate information on how adequate pre-service trainee teachers are prepared to handle initial literacy in indigenous languages. The findings of this study therefore, would be of importance to the main stakeholder, the Ministry of General Education which runs basic education and in fact is the main custodian of education provision in the country. The findings of this study might also be used to improve upon the policy pertaining to the teaching of initial literacy in the first grade through local languages during pre-service training. This could improve pupils' literacy skills. This might in turn have a positive impact on education standards because literacy cuts across all subjects in the lower basic school. The findings of the study might also inevitably contribute to the body of knowledge in the field of initial literacy.

1.4 Study site

The study was conducted in selected primary schools of Eastern province. Ten selected were adequate as the case study required a small number. These sites were chosen in Eastern province because they use local language as the medium of instruction.

1.5 Literature review

Global perspectives

Over the past two decades, there have been a growing number of researchers who have provided convincing support for the promotion of mother tongue education in the early years of schooling (Williams 1995) ^[17]. These researchers make the case that knowledge and skills gained in the mother tongue can transfer across languages; they also argue that multilingual children perform well at school when the school teaches the mother tongue effectively. Literature on literacy development attests to the benefits of using a child's mother tongue even when the goal is learning a second language. Further, research in second language acquisition has shown that the level of proficiency in the first language has a direct influence on the development of proficiency in the second language. For example, in two experimental studies of bilingual education in Guinea-Bissau and in Mozambique (Benson 2000), the students in the bilingual programme performed better when tested in the second language than their monolingual counterparts.

Research in Africa suggests, however, that multilingual language policies have met with limited success, partly due to a lack of appreciation of the context in which such policies are implemented. For example, many African parents assume that mother tongue policies have been imposed for political rather than sociolinguistic or demographic reasons (Baker, 2001) ^[1]. In addition, parents want their children to master the official language, or the language of wider communication (LWC), early in the education process. There is a common (though mistaken) belief that African languages are not equipped to deal with scientific and technical concepts.

Like many countries in Africa, Uganda, which gained independence from Britain in 1962, has been struggling to develop and implement effective multilingual policies in its schools. English is the official language of the country, but there is as yet no national language because none of the Ugandan languages has been considered demographically strong enough to take on this role.

More recently, Senegal has launched a scheme to revive local languages and, since the 2002 school year, children in 155 classes throughout the country have been taught in Wolof, Pulaar, Serere, Diola, Mandingo and Soninke, which were chosen from among the twenty-three languages spoken in Senegal. Children are to be taught entirely in their mother tongue at pre-school, 75 per cent of the time, during the first year of primary school and 50 per cent of the time, during the second and third years of primary. After that, French will become dominant.

The government Zambia in 1996 produced a comprehensive policy statement for education, called *Educating Our Future*, which incorporated the recommendations of the Reading Forum, stating that initial literacy and numeracy would be developed through a language which was familiar to children. This policy position further enhanced the status of Zambian languages and provided the rationale for future initiatives. It

should be noted, however, that 1996 was an election year in Zambia and political considerations were to the fore when the policy document was being drafted. The initial debates that preceded this change took place within educational circles, with always the threat of a political veto overhanging the process. Up to the penultimate draft of the policy document, certain senior politicians insisted on the retention of the status quo and only agreed to limited change in the final draft after sustained interventions by senior Ministry officials. The separation of medium of instruction from medium of initial literacy allowed *Educating Our Future* to set down initial literacy in a familiar language as a child's right while maintaining English as the medium of instruction.

A number of measures taken by the Ministry of Education since 1995 have been in support of the above objectives: The status of local languages was raised by including them among subjects that counted towards selection to Grade 8, formerly Lower Secondary, but now Upper Basic. Previously, although Zambian languages were taught up to Grade 7, they were not part of the package of selection subjects for the limited places at secondary level. This policy change greatly boosted the status of local languages and the morale of local language teachers and curriculum experts.

In Grade 1, the *New Breakthrough to Literacy* (NBTL) course, which is taught for one hour per day, is a version of the original *Breakthrough to Literacy* that has been modified to better suit the Zambian environment. This fast-track one-year initial literacy course in each of the seven official Zambian languages has had significant success. The evaluation report on the pilot programme carried out in Kasama during 1998 states: 'The programme was an unqualified success; children in *Breakthrough to Literacy* (BTL) classes were reading and writing at a level equivalent to Grade 4 or higher in non-BTL classes' (Kotze and Higgins, 1999, page 4). The review team further claimed at oral presentations of their findings to the Ministry of Education, that children in pilot schools in Kasama were performing in literacy tests at a level above what they would expect of children of similar age in South Africa, the UK, and Ireland – areas with which they were familiar.

In reality, local languages predominate in the early grades, particularly in the rural areas. In a new departure, *Educating Our Future* states clearly that children must have the right to be introduced to literacy and numeracy through a familiar language: 'The fact that initial reading skills are taught in and through a language that is unfamiliar to the majority of children is believed to be a major contributory factor to the backwardness in reading shown by many Zambian children. It is also a major factor in fostering rote learning, since from the outset the child has difficulties in associating the printed forms of words with their real underlying meaning. On the other hand, there is strong evidence that children learn literacy skills more easily and successfully through their mother tongue, and subsequently they are able to transfer these skills quickly and with ease to English or another language' (*Educating Our Future*, 1996) ^[10].

2. Methodology

The study undertook triangulated methodology approach where both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect data.

2.1 Research design

The study used a case study that employed qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The qualitative method allowed the researcher to obtain in-depth information about the phenomenon under investigation while the quantitative method ensured high levels of reliability of the gathered data. Case studies are concerned with a rich and clear description of events relevant to the case. They also strived to portray what it is like to be in a particular situation (White, 2003) [16]. Therefore, the researcher conducted a case study in order to get in depth understanding of the phenomenon under study.

2.2 Population

The study comprised of pupils, teachers and administrators from selected primary schools in Eastern Province.

2.3 Sample size

The total sample of 50 participants was considered for the study. This sample consisted of 5 pupils, 20 teachers, 20 administrators and 5 DEBS officials.

2.4 Sampling procedure

Sample random sampling was used to select pupils in order to accord each pupil equal chance to of being chosen to participate in the study. The teachers and administrators on the other hand were purposively selected because they were useful informants as they teach in the sampled primary schools.

2.5 Instruments for data collection

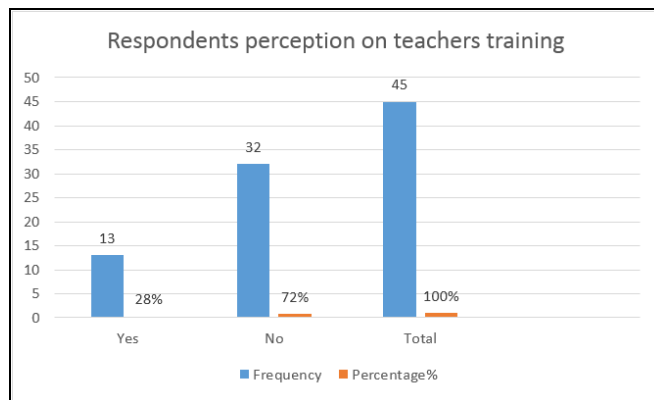
The study used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires were used to collect data from teacher and pupils. Questionnaires were used because they were friendly, save time and suitable when dealing with quantitative data. However, the inadequacies of using questionnaires were supplemented by employing interview schedules. The interviews unlike the questionnaires helped in collecting in-depth and comprehensive data from administrators.

2.6 Data analysis

Quantitative data was analysed using excel and STATA which helped in generating frequency tables and other descriptive statistics for easy interpretation and analysis. While qualitative data obtained from interviews was analysed using themes and content analysis. Emerging themes were critically and objectively described, analysed and interpreted. Further, ethical issues were also taken into considerations by obtaining participants consent and permission from relevant school head teachers. Additionally, the respondents' identities were kept anonymous as a way of enhancing confidentiality and privacy.

3. Findings and Discussions

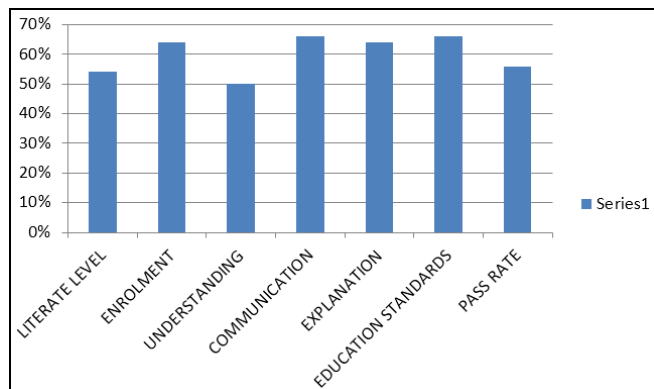
In establishing the impact of teaching in local language on pupils academic performance, the teachers were asked if they were trained to teach in local in their colleges. The responses are shown in the table below:



Source: Field data, 2016

Fig 1: Teachers training at college

Figure 1: revealed respondents views on teachers training at college concerning using local language as a medium of instruction in primary schools. Out of hundred percent, 13(28%) said teachers are adequately prepared to teach in local language while 32(72%) said teachers are not adequately prepared to use local language as a medium of instruction from grade one to four.



Source: Field data, 2016

Fig 2: Showing Positive Responses on Impact of Teaching in Local Languages

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.

3.1 Literacy levels as a result of using local language

Table1: Respondents views on literacy levels

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Excellent	1	4%
Very good	5	20%
Good	18	72%
Bad	1	4%
Total	25	100%

Source: Field data, 2016

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 25(100%) administrators interviewed 1(4%) said the literacy levels were excellent, 5(20%) said that the literacy levels in schools were very good, while 18(72%) said that literacy levels were good and 1 (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) ^[12]. 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 of these sounds and symbols make up words with which a learner is familiar. A set of symbols called letters are 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) ^[5] 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 word book 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) ^[12].

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 by helping them in home work, assignments and projects.

Teaching in local language has made the 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 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 local language. For instance at Chipata school for continue education pupils are given the opportunity to learn carpentry, auto mechanic in the afternoons in local language.

The enrolment levels have also increased during this period when using local language as a medium of instruction was introduced. The 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.

4. Conclusions and Recommendation

The study pointed out a number of perceived impacts 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. 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 reviewed on the implementation of the local language policy. They include congested classrooms, limited physical facilities and

shortage of qualified teachers, which negatively impacted on 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. The colleges must prepare the teachers adequately to teach in local languages. Based on the findings the following recommendations emerged from the study. (1) The government through the Ministry of General Education should build many schools to cope with this increase in enrolments. (2) The government through the Ministry of General Education should print the books and other materials in local languages for easy teaching and proper use of words. (3) The government through the Ministry of General Education should increase the funding to primary schools to meet the needs of the primary schools. (4) The government through the Ministry of General Education should train teachers in colleges on how to teach in local languages. (5) The government through the Ministry of General Education should retrain teachers in local languages so that they can teach effectively. (6) The teacher should be able to speak three to four languages so as to help implement local languages in schools.

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