



Zambia

**The impact of language policy
and practice on children's learning:
Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa
2017**

2.20 Zambia

2.20.1 Background information

Zambia's pre-independence education was characterized by an emphasis on local language medium education (Manchisi, 2004, p. 10). However when Zambia gained independence from Britain in 1964 it declared English as the country's only official language. The government policy permitted seven Zambian languages to be used as well: "in addition to the choice of English as the official language, the government also designated seven Zambian languages, namely Bemba, Kaonde, Lunda, Luvala, Lozi, Nyanja and Tonga as regional lingua francas to be used alongside English as school subjects, for functional literacy and public education" (Nkolola-Wakumelo, 2012, p. 129).

However in practice, the medium of instruction became English (Masaiti and Chiti, 2014, p. 444). English was the language of textbooks, although teachers were allowed to use one of the seven regional languages for oral explanations (Linehan, 2005, p. 8). Linehan (2005) notes that "the thirty-year period between 1965 and 1995 saw a number of moves to reverse this 'straight-for-English' approach. In two major reviews of educational policy, in 1977 and again in 1991, the case was made for vernacular languages and their role in ensuring quality in education was made" (p. 2).

In 1995, following the work of a National Reading Commission, it was decided to distinguish the language of initial literacy instruction from the language of overall instruction, with Zambian languages filling the first role and English filling the second. In addition, local languages were to be taught as a subject into the curriculum from Grade 1. As recently as 2011, English was being confirmed as the primary language of instruction (Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education [MoESVTEE], 2013, p. 2).

Ethnologue lists 46 languages for Zambia.

2.20.2. Current language policy

The current language policy takes a much firmer stand on the use of Zambian languages in education. The January 2013 National Guide for language of instruction practice, published by the Zambian Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MoESVTEE, 2013), mandates that Zambian languages replace English as medium of instruction in Grades 1 to 4, in all primary schools in the nation. The Ministry declared that "[f]amiliar languages will be used for teaching initial literacy and content subjects in the early education (pre-school) and lower primary school (Grades 1 to 4). The new policy shall be implemented in January 2014, in all the primary schools, public and private" (MoESVTEE, 2013, p. 3). The term "familiar language" as used in the policy is not referring to the seven regional languages, but rather to the local language of the community.

This dramatic policy change is based on the advocacy of Zambian linguists for many years, who argued that the use of English as medium of instruction was not serving the nation well (e.g. Sampa, 2005; Muyebaa, 2009; Mwila, 2011; Tambulakani and Bus, 2011).

2.20.3. Education policy and practice

The 2013 local language-medium policy statement is expressed strongly. The National Guide document states that one of the key factors contributing to a poor reading level in the past was the use of wrong language of instruction in Zambia, i.e. English. The National Guide also finds fault with the accepted use of zonal languages. "For all these past years the seven [zonal] languages have been synonymous with Zambian languages used in education. However, with evidence that some school catchment areas have been found to be disadvantaged because their familiar language or language of play is not any of these seven, it has become imperative that other dialects be brought on board" (MoESVTEE, 2013, p. 4).

The process by which this is to happen is delineated as well. Each local community is to agree on which Zambian language will be used as medium of

instruction in the first four grades. At Grade 5, one of the seven regional languages becomes the language of instruction. English is to be taught as a subject from Grade 2 or 3. Regarding the likelihood of English being chosen by the community as its “local language”, the National Guide notes that, “though in Zambia we have never yet had a community in which English language is the familiar language of learners or the community language of such a one, this is likely to be claimed by some segment of our nation” (p.4).

According to the Times of Zambia, the policy framework was developed in 2012 by means of “a consultative and participatory process”; and the pilot phase was to run from January to April 2013 in three districts of each of the 10 provinces (Chusa, 2013).

Also in 2013, the Zambian Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) published a National Literacy Framework that gives a central place to Zambian language-medium of instruction. In the preface to the framework, the Zambian Curriculum Development Centre states:

“The intention is to provide an effective additive bilingual programme where literacy skills acquired in local languages support the acquisition of literacy in English while at the same time sustaining and strengthening literacy in local languages” (CDC, 2013, p. v).

The framework also signals an intentional change from the reading methodology that

had underpinned Zambia’s Primary Reading Program (PRP) since 1998 (Sampa, 2005); the PRP was based on the New Breakthrough to Literacy methodology, which employed a whole-language approach to reading instruction. This methodology is being explicitly replaced by “reading instruction based on explicit lessons in key competence areas: synthetic phonics and daily instruction that offers learners opportunities to practice reading, writing, speaking and listening in the local language” (CDC, 2013, p. v).

The National Literacy Framework bases these radical methodological changes on the unsatisfactory learning-assessment data gathered in the last eight years¹. The framework attributes these poor results to “half-hearted attempts at developing primary language skills and literacy.” (CDC, 2013, p. 4). In explaining the turn to a greater use of local Zambian languages, the Framework states that:

“Learning in one’s first language is ‘essential for the initial teaching of reading.’ Children arrive on the first day of school with thousands of oral vocabulary words and tacit knowledge of the sound system of their mother tongue, but are unable to use and build upon these linguistic skills because they are instructed in a foreign language. Dismissing this prior knowledge, and trying to teach children to read in a language they are not accustomed to hearing or speaking, makes the teaching of reading difficult, especially in under-resourced schools in developing countries (ibid., p. 5).

1 The National Literacy Framework, 2013, notes: “The Grade 5 National Assessment Survey for 2006 and 2008 reflected learning achievements below 40 per cent in both English and Zambian Languages (35.3 per cent and 39.4 per cent respectively) and this percentage has been stagnating since 1999. The Grade 5 National Assessment Survey and the EGRA survey, both from 2010 have shown poor reading and writing abilities among learners. The South African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ III) of 2010 noted that among Grade 6 learners tested in reading, only 27.4 per cent were able to read at a basic competency level” (CDC, 2013, p.4)

2.20.4. Studies

As noted above, a number of studies over the years have demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the English dominant medium of instruction policies and practices in Zambia. A 2011 study by Tambulukani and Bus (2011) tested the degree of fit between students' home language and the language of instruction, on the reading skills of those students. The study found that "a better fit between children's most familiar Zambian language and the Zambian language in which basic reading skills are practiced leads to better reading skills in the Zambian language (p. 154). The authors conclude that the existing language policy at the time "falls short of expectations" (p. 157).

Matafwali (2010) examined the link between proficiency in language of instruction and reading performance in Zambian schoolchildren. The study found that language fluency and alphabetic skills are separate predictors of reading. It was also found that Grade 2 pupils in the study performed no better than Grade 1 pupils; this was attributed to the move from Zambian language-medium instruction to English medium in Grade 2.

Williams' reading research in the 1990s (Williams, 1998; Gordon 2014) demonstrated that reading levels among the Zambian students assessed were poor in both English and the local language; indeed, most students were reading at two levels below their appropriate grade. Williams notes that "not only are Zambian languages (i.e. one of the 'official' seven) not used as media of instruction, they are also neglected even as subjects in primary school teaching" (Williams, 1998, p. 51).

A case study on Zambian community schools, part of the USAID-funded Equip2 project, noted that these schools were receiving radio-

based instruction in literacy and numeracy in both English and the local languages, "following the official curriculum in those subjects." (EQUIP2, 2006, p. 12)²

2.20.5. Language education initiatives

Reading and Writing Instruction (RWI)

Room to Read's Reading and Writing Instruction (RWI) programme (Rigole, Cooper and Jukes, 2014) is a school-based intervention that aims to strengthen the teaching and learning of reading and writing in the early primary grades. The programme works in conjunction with the existing language curriculum and includes detailed lesson plans, classroom materials, and comprehensive teacher professional development. In Zambia, Room to Read's Grade 1 Comprehensive Literacy Instruction Program (CLIP), with support from UNICEF, was launched at 25 schools in Petauke District during the 2013 school year and expanded to follow the same cohort into Grade 2 in 2014.

Rigole et al. (2014) note that "language differences may also influence differences in instruction and learning outcomes. While Chinyanja is a familiar language and the language of instruction in both Kafue and Petauke Districts, teacher and pupils' home languages do vary" (p. 125).

Time to Learn³

This five-year project, implemented by the Education Development Center (EDC) and other partners and funded by USAID, aims to improve the reading performance of community school students by the project end-date of 2017. Among other activities, the project includes development of new Grade 1 reading textbooks and the delivery of library boxes to community schools. In a preliminary report of early grade reading assessment for the project, Pollard and Gardsbane (2013) found that learners

2 <http://www.equip123.net/docs/e2-ZambiaCaseStudy.pdf>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

3 <http://idd.edc.org/projects/zambia-time-learn>. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

performed poorly in basic reading skills in local languages as “a number of schools report that they teach reading in English, not the local language, even in early grades” (p. 4).

Read to Succeed⁵

This project, funded by USAID and implemented by Creative Associates and the Zambian government, aims to improve student performance in the public school system with a specific focus on early grade reading. Policy support and teacher training feature strongly in the project; with the support of the project, the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education developed the National Literacy Framework of 2013 (above) as well as teaching and learning materials that support a phonics-based approach to reading instruction.

Mobile Gateway Zambia

This is a Praekelt Foundation and RTI International project that uses mobile telephone technology to support USAID’s Read to Succeed initiative.⁶

The Eschool 360

Education NGO Impact Network, in collaboration with Zambian partner organization Mwabu, has developed a tablet-based learning program called The Eschool 360, aimed at bringing quality education to rural Zambian schools. The Mwabu tablet “contains thousands of preloaded lessons and lesson plans that adhere to the Zambian national curriculum, are approved by the Ministry of Education, and are taught in the local language”.⁷

5. http://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Zambia_RTS.pdf. Accessed 11 March, 2016.

6. <http://blog.praekeltfoundation.org/post/52930778479/mobile-technology-set-to-impact-zambian-education>. Accessed 11 March, 2016

7. <http://www.impactnetwork.org/our-program/>



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