

The Impact of Familiar Local Language Medium of Instruction on Zambian Primary School Pupils' Academic Performance: A Case Study of Mumbwa Primary Schools

Elliot Machinyise*

Department of Literature and Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia

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*Corresponding author: Elliot Machinyise, Department of Literature and Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia, Email: machinyise@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

As multiethnic and multilingual nation, Zambia has more than 70 languages spoken within its boundaries. As result of this linguistic landscape the selection of appropriate language of instruction in schools has been a challenge for a long time. In order to meet this linguistic diversity, Zambia has developed an educational framework which stipulates that familiar local languages should be used as the Medium of Instruction (MOI) from grade one to four in public primary schools. Therefore, this paper investigated the impact of mother tongue medium of instruction on pupils' quality of learning in Zambian primary schools. The findings have revealed that the students' ethnicity and national identity are best portrayed through mother tongue medium of instruction. In addition, acquisition of skills and application seems to be efficient in classes where such skills are taught and explained in the mother tongue of children. It has also been revealed that children in private schools where practical subjects are taught in English perform poorer than their counterparts in public schools. A descriptive method of research was used for the collection of data. 50 teachers from selected public and private primary schools and 10 parents of Mumbwa district were selected for this study. Appropriate recommendations were made in light of the findings. The study will provide further information on how local community and parents can work with schools in facilitating the teaching of children in local languages. The recommendations the study brought up will bridge the gap between the teacher training institutions and the teaching service commission in order to train and deploy teachers according to the needs of schools. This study will bring to the fore the necessity of equipping teachers with the knowledge of local language of children whilst at teacher training institutions.

Keywords: Medium of instruction; familiar languages; dominant language; mother tongue;

Introduction

Globally, there are 50-75 million 'marginalized' children who are not enrolled in school. Children whose primary language is not the language of instruction in school are more likely to drop out of school or fail in early grades. Research has shown that children's first language is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary school [6]. In spite of growing evidence and parent demand, many educational systems around the world insist on exclusive use of one or sometimes several privileged languages or dominant languages as media of instruction. This means

excluding other languages and with them the children who speak them [2].

While there is considerable and general consensus among academicians about linguistic and cognitive advantages of using national and dominant languages as media of instruction in schools, little is known and said about the implications of using mother tongues of learners as media of instruction. For many years, especially in Africa, indigenous languages have been overlooked and treated as an impediment to the learning of officially supported second languages such as French and English. In many Zambian schools the use of mother tongues or local languages is still discouraged and is a punishable offence. There is a general feeling and practice among educational administrators and parents to link communicative competence in the official language to cognitive advancement and academic efficiency.

However, little or nothing is known about the implication of ignoring a child's mother tongue within the school environment. Barcu, et al. (2004) report that abandoning children's mother tongue within the educational environment does not only affect the vitality of the home language but puts the children's cultural identity at the risk of extinction as well. Using children's mother tongue as medium of instruction promotes and facilitates multilingualism as the teacher will be compelled to teach in the mother tongues of all pupils. In most Western countries, multilingual and linguistic diversity is increasingly the norm.

According to the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (2013), all the teaching and learning in all the classroom subjects at the lower primary level will be in the familiar Zambian languages. This is because there is evidence that children learn more easily and successfully through the languages they know and understand well.

It is against this backdrop that this study was undertaken to investigate the impact of using local familiar languages as media of instruction on Zambian primary school pupils' academic performance specifically in Mumbwa district.

Literature Review

According to Machinyise (2017), more than 70 million

children worldwide are marginalised and drop out of school due to language of instruction barrier. In his study on the assessment of the effectiveness of training offered to student teachers in the implementation of mother tongue policy, Machinyise (2017) stated that children whose mother tongue is not the medium of instruction in school find themselves out of school because they are unable to receive instruction in a second language.. Research has shown that children's first language is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary school [6]. According to Cummins (2007), education in the mother tongue helps improve the academic performance of young learners. Cummins (2007) revealed that children who had their mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the first three years of elementary primary school scored higher in English tests in the fourth, fifth and sixth grade, than those who learned most of their subjects in English from grade one.

However, [3] reports that the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in the early grades contribute to low competencies in other languages and greatly contributes to writing, spelling, reading and pronunciation errors in English and other languages because of mother tongue interference. [3] Further points out that when children are taught in their mother tongue in the early grade, they will find problems in expressing themselves in the official language in the upper grades as they will be thinking in their mother tongue before expressing themselves in English. [2] Report that in spite of increasing evidence and community demand, many educational systems and educationists in many countries still insist on exclusive use of one or sometimes several privileged and dominant languages. In their study, Anold et al reveal that in many countries, the use of mother tongue in school is viewed as a barrier to the acquisition of official languages and in some schools it is a punishable offence.

Bialystok (2001) reveals that the exclusion of the children's mother tongue from the school system has a negative implication on the local community. Bialystok (2001) also points out that abandoning children's mother tongue within the school environment does not only work against the vitality of the home language but threatens the children's culture and puts their identity at the risk of extinction as well.

Methods

Research Design

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyse data. This concept of combining methods is used bearing in mind that any method used on its own has limitations and bias which could be reduced by using many approaches

Site Selection and Target Population

This study was conducted in eight selected primary schools of Mumbwa district between September and November 2017. Five public primary schools and three private primary schools were selected for the study. The target population was teachers, Heads of these schools and parents with children learning at these selected schools.

The sample included 40 teachers from public primary schools, 10 teachers from private primary schools and 10 parents with children learning in these schools. The choice of forty teachers was made based on the fact that these were teachers who taught pupils in lower primary schools and are the ones affect by the new policy of using local familiar languages. The ten parents were chosen for the study because they were the custodian of the cultural heritage of the learners.

Purposive sampling was used to select the teachers and parents for this study. 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.

Data Collection

The study used the questionnaires, interviews, and observations as research instruments. The questionnaires were distributed to teachers to elicit information on their views on mother tongue medium of instruction. Interviews were carried out on parents whose children are learning at the selected schools. The researcher also observed the class performance of pupils in various selected schools.

Data Analysis

Data collected by questionnaires was analyzed by use of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Processing of the interview data included descriptive analysis and categorizing similar items into themes and sub-headings.

Findings and Discussions

The following are the finding of this study:

(a). Easy Acquisition of Skills and Knowledge in the Familiar Language

According to most heads of school and teachers who participated in the study, pupils in lower primary are performing better in class now with the introduction of mother tongue medium of instruction compared to the time when English was the medium of instruction. From the observation of literacy competences in lower primary classes, there is improved reading and writing abilities in public schools compared to private ones. Children in public schools were able to pronounce and write initial sounds, phonics, phonemes, starting with syllables, word building, and sentence building and writing simple paragraphs. Because of clear and understandable instructions given in the mother tongue, pupils in public lower primary schools showed greater skill and good performance in Creative and Technology Studies (CTS) which comprises Home Economics and Expressive Arts. Parents interviewed explained that their children can now apply the basic creative skills they learn at school to home chores. On the other hand, parents with children learning in private schools stated that their children can speak better English, the official language than those in public schools. They also boasted that their children are good at current affairs and modern technology such as computers and other digital electronics.

(b). Knowledge of Indigenous Language and Stylistics Has Improved

Another positive impact of using mother tongues as media of instruction mentioned by parents and teachers was that of maintaining mother tongue languages and its stylistics such as proverbs and figures of speech. The study revealed that children are able to use and apply familiar local language knowledge to real life situation which is a positive aspect for the promotion of children's cultural identity. According to the parents, forcing children to learn in a foreign language was putting local language at risk of extinction. They explained that in schools where the use of indigenous languages is prohibited, pupils tend to lose their knowledge and fluency in their mother tongues. Teachers pointed out that in a multilingual society; linguistic diversity in school has helped children show their identity through children's mother tongue.

(c). Parents Can Now Participate in Their Children's Learning

Parents whose children are in public schools reported that since their children are taught in their mother tongue, as parents they are able to help their children with school work at home and they can actually make a difference in their children's education as they are able to freely communicate and understand school work in the familiar language.

(d). Scarcity of Teachers with Communicative Competence in Local Familiar Languages.

Some Head teachers interviewed on the impact of using familiar local lingual languages in lower primary schools on the performance of learners pointed out that as school managers, they are facing a challenge of finding teachers who can fluently teach in local familiar language of Mumbwa district. School managers complained that Mumbwa is home to speakers of minority languages consequently it is a challenge to find teachers who are natives or near natives in the areas. Teachers who are deployed to Mumbwa district are resort to teaching children dominant regional official languages such as Tonga and Nyanja disadvantaging Sala and Kaonde-Ila speaking children.

(e). Change of Medium of Instruction Disturb Learners' Knowledge Acquisition

A good number of teachers and school heads feel changing the language of teaching in the fifth grade affects learners' ability to acquire new knowledge as they have to learn a new language and get instructions from the same new languages. Teachers feel up to the tender age of 5 years, children can learn languages very easily. So, they can be taught any number of languages in parallel. But according, it is preferable that the method of instruction should remain the same for primary school and high school whether it is mother tongue or any other language to make them think and express their thoughts better.

Some parents also suggest that the disadvantages of using the mother tongue as the media of instruction among primary school children is that they will be used to think and express their

thoughts and views in mother tongue. After the fourth grade, it will be difficult for them to adopt and switch over to another language as a medium of instruction because their ability of learning and mastering languages decreases with age.

Recommendations

There is needed to take into account the communicative competence of primary school teachers in the zonal familiar languages. The deployment of primary school teachers should consider the prospective teacher's communicative competence in the children's familiar language where they are posted.

Questions need to be explored about what are the most important outcomes and how best to measure them in various teaching and learning contexts. How should assessment of pedagogical effectiveness take into account the different pace of children's growing competence in core skills including reading, writing, numeracy and problem solving when they learn through multiple languages? What language should be used in giving assessment instructions?

There is also a gap in research on effective approaches for successful transitions of mother-tongue educated children to secondary school in a dominant language.

Family members play an important role as children's 'first teachers' and research should explore the roles of informal and non-formal education and family interaction in promoting literacy, numeracy, and higher order cognitive skills using the mother tongue.

We need to involve community members with diverse language skills in formal school and train teachers with varying language capacities and levels of education to be effective in familiar language teaching. As knowledge develops, we must get better at communicating research findings so that practitioners, policy makers and donors are informed and motivated by evidence about how the potential of familiar language medium of instruction can be harnessed to achieve Education for All.

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