

## Implementation of The Language of Instruction Policy: Experiences of Teachers and Pupils in Secondary Schools.

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Having experienced the ravaging effects of the 'straight-for-English' approach to initial literacy, the Zambian Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MoESVTEE) in 2013 mandated all pre-schools and early primary schools (from Grade 1 to 4) (both public and private) to replace English as a medium of instruction with the familiar language of a given community. This policy, which was implemented in January 2014, allowed teachers to teach initial literacy and content subjects in pre-school and lower primary in the familiar language of the given community. However, while the policy has produced overwhelming results in terms of breaking through to literacy, it is not clear whether educators at higher levels have fully understood and adhered to the specifications of the policy. Today it is common as one walks around schools to hear teachers conducting lessons in local and familiar languages*

*exclusively in upper primary and even secondary schools. This study therefore aimed to find out the experiences of teachers and pupils in the implementation of the language of instruction policy in the classroom situation It further established the impact and consequences of using a familiar language for instruction beyond Grade 4. Primary data from selected schools in Chibombo District was collected and analysed through an exploratory research design with qualitative methods. The key informants came from Chibombo DEBS.*

**Key words:** Language Policy, Language of instruction, Initial literacy, familiar language, implementation

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0. Overview

This chapter introduces the implementation of the Language of Instruction Policy as experienced by teachers and pupils in secondary schools. It establishes the background of the study, the statement of the problem, purpose and objectives of the study, research questions and the literature that fed into the study.

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Language is key to any meaningful communication. It is the basis of the actions people do. In other words, language does things. Byon (2006, p.137) asserts that “speech acts reflect the fundamental values and social norms of target language and demonstrate the rules of language use in a speech community.” A speech community is described by Bloomfield (1933, p.29) as “a group of people who use the same set of speech signals.” Therefore, the speech act theory assumes its importance not only in sociolinguistic and pragmatic circles, but also in academic circles.

In 2013, the Zambian Government enacted a policy of teaching children from Grade One to Grade Four in the local language of a given area. Selected local languages were designated for different areas. The aim of the government was to assist young learners to easily break through to initial literacy as it is true that a learner grasps concepts easier and quicker in a familiar than a strange language. I have also been scientifically proven that in their early stages of life, children are incapable of viewing issues from more than two angles (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009). So to introduce English into the vocabulary of a beginner will

be asking too much of a child. It is better that the new concepts are introduced in the already known language and then slowly lead the child into the foreign language, which is English when they are well on in age and maturity. Before Zambia became independent, there was emphasis on the use of local languages during classroom instruction a scenario that changed completely after independence when English was declared the official language as well as the sole language of instruction (Manchishi, 2004 and Nkolola Wakumelo, 2012). Furthermore, Chishiba and Manchishi (2015) in their review of the language policy from pre-colonial times revealed that there have been two schools of thought over the language of instruction policy; one favouring the use of English while the other favours the use of local languages. However, going back to the colonial times, the Phelps-Stokes Commission of 1924 had recommended that English be given the status of official language for both education and government day to day business while the then four local official languages (Tonga, Lozi, Nyanja and Bemba) were to be used as media of instruction from Grade one to four with a view to preserve the African identity and culture as well as meet the academic needs of the native races (Snelsons, 1924).

Over the years, there have been debates and varied practices on which language between English and local language should be used for classroom instruction. Politically, due to the multilingual nature of Zambia, it was impossible for leaders to pick on one of the 73 local languages and make it the official language of instruction without exciting tribal passions and creating serious discontent and unrest (Carmody, 2004). This is still the case in the present Zambia. Language issues are very sensitive. To try and avoid this problem, seven

regional languages of Tonga, Lozi, Lunda, Kaonde, Luvale, Nyanja and Bemba were chosen by politicians to be used as languages of instruction in their respective regions alongside English which is the national official language. Nevertheless, this did not solve the problem because this unrest is still experienced and has included the minority groups.

The most recent development however came in 2013 when the National guide was published by the Zambian Ministry of Education, Science Vocational Training and Early Education (MoESVTEE) mandated that Zambian languages be strictly used for instruction from Grade 1 to 4 in all schools in the nation. This policy was implemented in January, 2014. The policy further included not only the regional local language but the familiar language of the community for initial literacy classes. From Grade 5 upwards, English has remained playing the role of official language and medium of instruction nationwide.

This study therefore aimed at investigating the experiences of teachers and pupils in implementing this policy keeping in mind that there are two schools of thought among people; one favouring the early introduction of English and the other favouring introducing the foreign language later in the child's life.

## 1.2. Statement of the Problem

The study set out to establish what obtains in the real school and classroom situations with regard to the implementation of the Language of Instruction Policy through the experiences of teachers and pupils in Chibombo District..

## 1.3. Justification of the Study

With the multilingual nature of Zambia, this study was meant to evaluate effectiveness of the language policy on the choice of the language of instruction in Chibombo District. The study further established the experiences of both the teachers and pupils in the implementation of the policy.

## 1.4. Objectives of the Study

**Main objective:** To establish the experiences of teachers and pupils in the implementation of the language of Instruction policy in selected secondary schools in X District.

### Specific objectives

- (i) To establish how teachers interpret the policy of language of instruction in selected schools in Chibombo District.
- (ii) To determine how the policy of language of instruction is being implemented in selected schools in Chibombo District.
- (iii) To determine the experiences of teachers and pupils in the implementation of the Language of Instruction Policy in selected schools in Chibombo District.
- (iv) What are the pupils' experiences in learning in the language of instruction?

## 1.5. Research Questions

- (i) How do teachers understand the policy of Language of Instruction?
- (ii) How is the Language of Instruction policy implemented in schools selected schools in Chibombo District

- (iii) What are the teachers' experiences in teaching in the language of instruction?

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY: Materials/ Methods/Design/Methodology

### 2.1 Study area

The study was conducted in four selected schools in Chibombo District.

### 2.2 Research Design

The study used the exploratory research design with qualitative methods for collecting and analyzing the data. Different questionnaires were distributed to teachers and pupils who were randomly samples in the selected schools. Focus group discussions were conducted to solicit primary data from both the teachers and pupils on their experience of the implementation of the Language of Instruction Policy in the classroom.

### 2.3 Population

The study targeted teachers and pupils as these are directly and actively involved in the learning process in the classroom where the language of instruction is implemented.

### 2.4 Study Sample

The study sample size was 110 comprising 10 teachers and 100 Grade 8 to 12 pupils from the selected schools.

## Results

### Sample description

Among the sampled teachers for the study, the largest proportion of 45 percent had between 11 and 15 years of teaching experience while 35 percent had 10 or less years of experience. 20 percent of the respondents had between 16 and 20 years of teaching, figure 1.

In terms of the distribution of grades taught by the sampled teachers, 60 percent exclusively teach at secondary level, grade 8 to 12 while 5 percent teach exclusively grades 5 to 7. This leaves 35 percent of the sampled teachers as having some experience teaching grades 1 to 4, which are actually the target grades for the language policy, figure 2.

According to figure 3, the longest years of tenure by sampled teachers at current school was above 10½ years, with the longest serving having 20 years. The majority of the sampled teachers however had been at their current school for a period of between 1½ and 7 years, representing 55 percent of the respondents. 25 percent of the respondents had been at their current school for 1½ years or less.

In terms of pupils sampled, the major characteristics captured were age, grade they are in, how long they have been at current school, and whether they are in a boarding or day school. Figure 4 shows that majority of the pupils that responded (59%) were in the age group 14 to 17 years. 22 percent were either 13 years or below while 19 percent were in the age group 18 to 20 years.

On the other hand, there was a huge representation among respondents of secondary school pupils with grades 10 to 12 accounting for 53 percent while grades 8 and 9 accounted for 42 percent. In the combined schools, there was representation by upper primary pupils, basically grade 7s who accounted for a 5 percent.

With regards to tenure of pupils at current school, the majority respondents, 52 percent, were new with less than 1 year of being there. Those with tenure of 1 to 3 years made up 30

percent of the respondents while 12 percent had been in their current school for between 4 and 7 years. There was a 3 percent of respondents representing pupils who had been at the same school for 8 to 11 years while a further 3 percent of the respondents opted not to give their tenure.

As to the representation of boarding against day schooling respondents, the split was 67.7 percent for boarding and 32.3 percent for day schooling.

## Findings

With regards to the question of understanding the term language of instruction, all respondents with regards to teachers had the literal understanding of the term. However, with regard to the policy, despite acknowledging knowing about it when asked further on the same and how it is supposed to operate most teachers showed lack of knowledge, only a mere 10 percent demonstrated understanding of the policy and indicated it being implemented in their school.

When asked if the policy was helpful, there was an equal split among teachers with 45 answering to the affirmative, another 45 percent saying the policy is not helpful at all while 10 percent did not give a response to the question. When those answering to the affirmative were further asked how the policy was helpful, there were mixed responses, basically showing deep misunderstanding of the policy as some seemed to indicate that the policy is about introducing English as early as possible which helps children to develop comprehension of the language and thus aids their understanding in later years of schooling. The flip side response was that the policy is good as it helps children

develop literacy much easily in the commonly used language. There was also an indication of the policy having made teaching easier, especially at earlier grades as pupils are able to understand with less difficulties as well as communicate and participate in class. In terms of challenges faced by teachers in later grades due to the policy, the most common was that due to late introduction of the children to the English language, comprehending and communicating in English becomes a big issue in later grades. They indicated that pupils in grade 8 are failing to communicate or express themselves in English thus making it very difficult to teach.

When teachers were asked if they see any evidence of pupils appreciating the language of instruction policy, 60 percent said yes, 35 percent said no while 5 percent did not respond to the question. When propped further to explain, those that said yes gave as their reason the fact that most children attain literacy faster. On the other hand those that said no explained that it just complicates the learning process as after grade 4 the pupils have to start adjusting and learning English which they struggle with and thus are hampered to fully participate in class. They also said the late introduction to English hampers some pupils' learning by limiting their interaction when they get to secondary school where they have to always use English.

On their personal opinions about the policy, a good number of them indicated they felt the policy was actually disadvantaging pupils by delaying exposure to English. They explained that when English is only introduced to them in grade 5, the pupils have challenges as they have to learn the language as well as try to



understand what is being taught to them in English. The common opinion was that English as a language of instruction be introduced as early in education as possible. However, there was also a view expressed that the policy is helping children attain literacy earlier and much easier.

With pupil respondents, 43.8 percent of the pupils out rightly indicated never having heard about the language policy while 54.2 percent acknowledged having heard about it. However, even among the 54.2 percent of the pupils who indicated having heard about it, when asked what the policy is all about they showed lack of understanding or even knowing it.

In terms of what language of instruction is used in their learning, all pupils indicated English. When asked further if this language made it easy for them to understand in class, again they all responded affirmatively. However, when asked if they had challenges with the language of instruction in class, 18.8 percent of the respondents indicated they did have challenges with the language. In itemising what challenges they have, a good number of them pointed out that they still struggle to comprehend some words and so sometimes when the teaching is speaking they can get what he is saying. They also pointed out that spelling and grammar in English was a problem for some of them. To some the challenge was with the spoken English where they fail to express themselves.

When pupils were asked whether the language policy is good or not, there emerged two viewpoints, one saying its good as it helps everyone to understand what is being taught in early years of schooling. This group also pointed out that it is good as it promotes

knowing of one's local language. The pupils also pointed out that the local language promoted in early grades helps with interactions among pupils and hence helps with learning. On the other hand, there was a group of opinions that expressed negativity for the policy. This group pointed out that not all families use English in their homes and therefore the lack of it in early grades disadvantages them in later years of schooling. They also pointed out that English is the widely spoken language world over and so children should be taught in it early so that they can master it to better their lives. They explained that delayed introduction to English leads to difficulties in understanding the language once one goes to a school and levels where English is the only mode of instruction in learning.

On the question of whether the policy should continue or be changed, majority indicated it should be continued but modified. Only 7.3 percent indicated felling it should be discontinued.

## Discussions

From the responses to the questionnaire by the teachers, it is clear to see that there is very limited understanding of the language of instruction policy even among the educators. It is undisputable that majority, if not all teachers do understand that the term language of instruction refers to the language to be used when teaching. However, in reference to the policy, a number of them are actually blank and do not even know that there is a policy that speaks to local language being the language of instruction for first four years of education as they seemed to refer to English as the language of instruction, in reference to higher grades.

The problem of lack of understanding the policy is even worse for pupils who most of them do not seem to have a clue of its existence, though just like teachers they actually know that local language is being used at lower primary level. The confusion of lack of or poor understanding of what policy was under research was cleared by explaining to them further.

From the questionnaire responses, it was very clear to the researcher that there are mixed feelings about the policy, both from teachers as well as from pupils. In as much as there is evidence of support for the policy both among teachers and pupils, there were almost matching opposing views. For those that are pro policy, they emphasise on the point of its enhancing early literacy attainment. They emphasise that learning in local language helps children to grasp literacy and learn how to read and write faster. This argument is furthered that it even becomes easier for learners in later grades to learn other things as they would have the foundations.

Nonetheless, there is the opposing view that the policy actually is more detrimental to the learners. For this school of thought, which has supporters both among teachers and pupils as well, delaying introducing children to English only hampers their mastery of the language which they will eventually have to use for most of their lives. They argue that those that are only introduced to English in grade 5 and come from homes where they are not exposed to English, they then have to start learning this whole new language in addition to using it in learning other subjects. They emphasise on the point that these grade fives then have to first learn to understand the language while

concurrently having to understand what is being taught to them. It is argued that it's like learning the language becomes an additional subject. This school of thought actually can be related to some studies and articles that have been written before. The American Academy of Pediatrics in 2009 published an article on Cognitive Development in Preschool Children under the title, 'Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth to Age 5' in which they explained that children's cognitive development is best cultivated at younger ages. The article goes on to detail the different kinds of development that occurs in a child in their early years. This is further illustrated by the Harvard University which wrote a paper, 'Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence' under the Center on the Developing Child. Jürgen M. Meisel in a paper 'Second Language Acquisition in Early Childhood' published in 2009 gave the strongest argument for this school of thought stating that there is an evident difference between learners of language below 10 and those above 10 years in terms of rate of acquisition of the language, use of correct language construction rules as well as the ultimate level of grammatical competence.

These divergent views that came out of the questionnaire data however was not very evident in the focused group discussions where the researcher had an opportunity to ask follow up questions and probe answers. For both teachers and pupils, there seemed to be a high level of agreement that the policy has actually not been beneficial to learners at higher grades. The respondents in the discussions revealed that pupils are struggling to even comprehend and understand concepts in English such that teachers are forced to use local language even

in secondary school. The fact that teachers revealed using local languages even at high grades such as in secondary school collated with information provided by questionnaire respondents who gave the opinion that the policy had actually created problem for teaching at higher grades as pupils were getting even to secondary without knowing properly the English language.

The researcher experienced first-hand the challenges expressed by teachers of pupils struggling with the English language as engagement with respondents revealed glaring incompetence in the language. Some of the questionnaires indicating that the respondent was a grade 12 pupil left one wondering whether they were truly grade 12 pupils looking at the English in the responses. Many of the respondents were failing to express themselves in writing, as well as spoken during the focused group discussions.

The researcher also discovered that among the opposing views to the policy, there is a concern that the policy is creating a problem at a different level where children have to move regions within the first four years of education. There was expressed a serious concern that a child learning in one local language in grade one having to shift to an area where there is a different local language in grade two may face an added challenge in school, or even face discrimination and segregation in the new school.

## Conclusion

It is the researcher's considered conclusion that first and foremost the language of instruction policy needs extensive sensitisation among teachers and the general public, if it is to be

carried forward. It is indisputable that the policy has its merits, strongest of which is its facilitation for children to attain literacy early. However, this literacy attained becomes of no use, if as evidenced by the testimony of both teachers and pupils, the policy ends up creating a cadre of pupils that struggle to learn English, the official language of instruction for the rest of the learning years. It renders all futile if as confessed by the teachers and pupils, children end up reaching secondary school without being in a position to comprehend concepts in English yet all their learning is in English at that level. Nevertheless, it is the recommendation of this researcher that there is need for more elaborate study into language learning by children in Zambia to fully understand whether the policy is actually achieving its intended purpose, or how to better implement the policy to positively impact on the target groups. This researcher recommends that this understanding is very urgent before the nation gets a generation that is incapable of communicating in the official language.

## Acknowledgment

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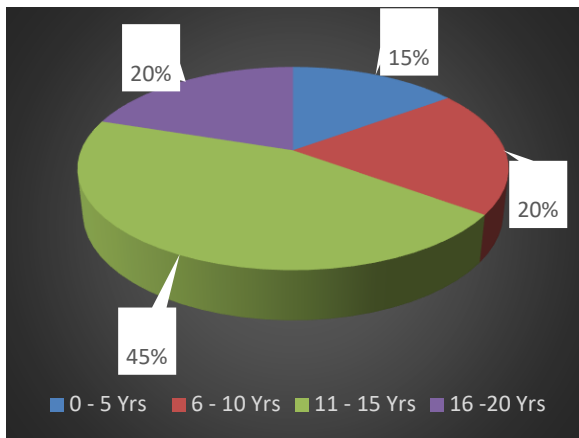


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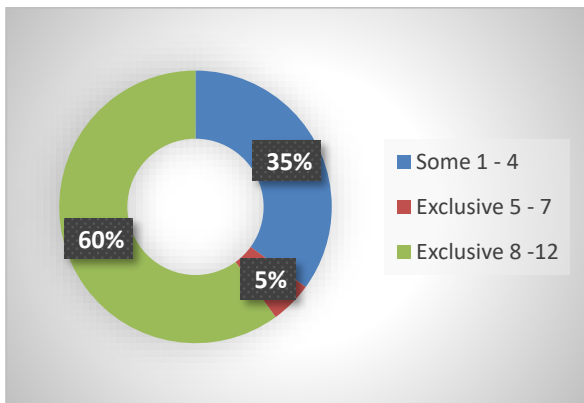
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## Tables and Figures

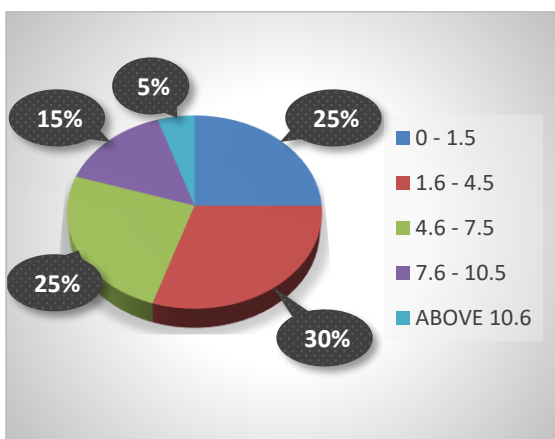
**Figure 1. Distribution of Years of Teaching Experience**



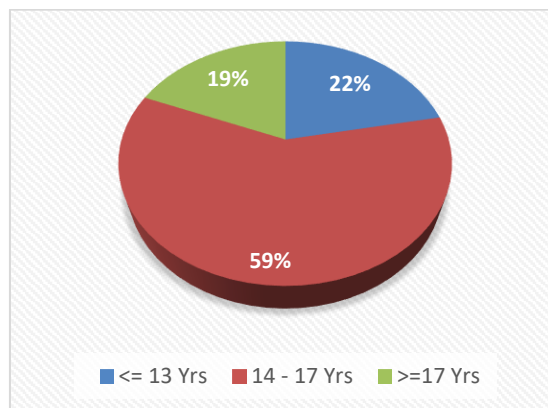
**Figure 2. Distribution of Grades Taught by Respondents**



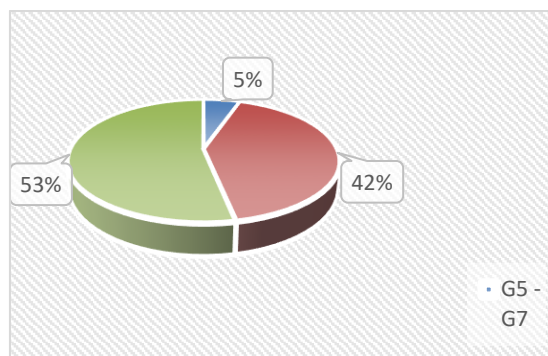
**Figure 3. Distribution of Years of Tenure at Current School**



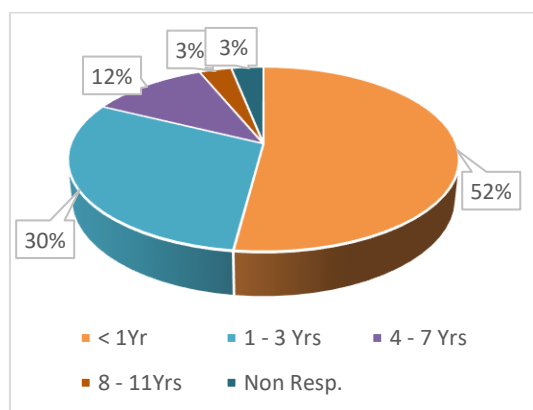
**Figure 4. Age Distribution of Pupil Respondents**



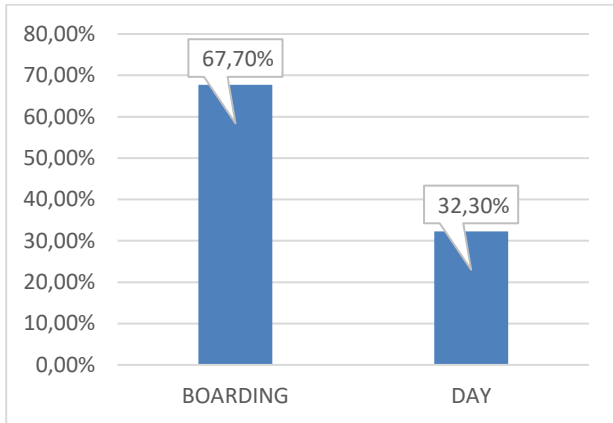
**Figure 5. Grade Distribution of Pupil Respondents**



**Figure 6. Distribution of Pupil Tenure at Current School**



**Figure 7. Distribution of Boarding/Day  
Schooling**



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