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# **FAMILIAR LANGUAGE VERSUS MOTHER TONGUE :** **An Analysis of the Implications of the Current Language of** **Instruction Policy in Zambia**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the implications of the shifts in the language of instruction (LoI) in Zambian schools. Fifty years after independence, Zambia is still faced with language policy problems. In 2013, the Ministry of Education, Science and Vocational Training offloaded a new curriculum in which the LoI in Grades 1 to 4 is a familiar language. Many studies support teaching and learning through a mother tongue but the implications of a familiar LoI have not yet been analysed. This article blends history, published research findings and a survey of the views of teachers of Grades 1 to 4 teaching in a familiar language. The challenges facing the implementation of such a policy are in no way different from those faced when this policy was first attempted prior to 1977. The article recommends a more inclusive approach to the implementation of the LoI policy in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal Number 4 on education by 2030.

## **Introduction**

### *International Practices on Language of Instruction Policy*

Language is a medium of communication and serves various purposes to national and personal value. It preserves national and individual identity and is a conduit for cultural values, beliefs, norms and practices. Njovu, Hamooya and Bwalya (2013) citing Ramaas (2009), noted that literacy, culture and language are elements that define individuals and their sense of belonging to a group or a nation. No one at birth chooses to be born of parents of a certain language and because of this lack of choice, children learn fluently first the languages of their mothers (mother tongue) and later the other languages as second languages which are learnt as a result of being a member of a larger community. The lack of choice to be born of parents of a certain language

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gives children the right to be taught and to learn in the language they understand better, that is the mother tongue or first language. Brock-Utone, Desai, Qorro and Pitman (2010 Eds) have cited Cummins (2000), (iteachilearn, <http://website-box.net/site/iteachilearn.org>); Baker (2000); and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), among others saying there are many advantages of teaching learners in their mother tongue. Citing Skutnabb-Kangas (2006), Phillipson (1992, 2009) and Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson, Mohanty and Panda, Brock-Utone, Desai, Qorro and Pitman (2010), strongly advocate that education in one's mother tongue is a linguistic human right. Odugu (2011: 25) says 'advocacy for mother-language education and multilingual education serves to revive endangered languages, foster ethnolinguistic cultural identity, enhance academic achievement and secure political stability'. One very important advantage of mother tongue education is the amplified grassroots participation in policy formulation (Odugu, 2011) though this advantage goes beyond policy to policy implementation. Local people, who are stakeholders in a curriculum their children are educated through, have a strong say on a curriculum which is delivered in a language they understand.

The subject of LoI is a controversial one in many countries with different histories. Many countries that were colonised adopted the colonial masters' languages as the LoI in schools and as official languages or national languages on radio and in offices. Examples of such countries are many, especially in Africa. These include South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, Zambia. However, these countries, for instance, have different numbers of local languages.

Apart from colonisation, other factors that support the use of foreign languages are the globalisation ideologies that promote the idea of the world as a global village. In this global village ideology, all nations become members of the global village educating people who should work and do business anywhere in the world with language as a tool for creating understanding among the different people of different origins. The globalisation assertion to support foreign languages especially English, is supported by Hornberger and Vaish (2009: 9) who stated that 'globalisation has opened up many sectors of employment where knowledge of English is necessary and consequently, there is a tremendous demand for English from the primary school itself.' But the choice of a language of instruction in any nation can bring problems if the citizens are not given the mandate to choose which language they would use as LoI. In Zambia, for instance, the LoI policy of teaching learners from Grades 1 to 4 in local familiar language has brought conflicts between the Lunda and Luvale people of North-Western Province of Zambia (Muzata, 2015). Countries that have respected people's choice of the language to use for instruction have remained united for many years. Hornberger and Vaish (2009) report that in Singapore and India, the

government bowed to pressure from its citizens to introduce English as a medium of instruction in schools because citizens see more benefits in using English as a medium of instruction for their children. In the Singaporean case, English was meant to empower people over developing mother tongues. But this did not mean mother tongues were abolished. In India, Tooley and Dixon (2003) quoted by Hornbergera and Vaish (2009) observed attrition rates in government schools because English was only offered at secondary school level.

Nations that have embraced foreign languages have adopted different structures. In South Africa, although eleven languages have been recognised as official languages, English remains dominant and is used as a medium of instruction starting from primary school. Lack of teaching materials in local languages has been forwarded as one of the impediments to the use of local languages as a medium of instruction (Brock-Utne *et al.*, 2010). In Tanzania, English is taught as a subject at primary school and assumes the status of LoI at Junior Secondary School level in Form One. The LoI at primary level is Kiswahili (Brock-Utne *et al.*, 2010). The Tanzanian situation adopts Kiswahili as a Lingua Franca although there are other local languages in the country. Although benefits have been observed in learning fluency in Kiswahili by Tanzanian learners, the learners have difficulties with English at Form One and even when they enter university. Code switching is reported to be the strategy adopted for secondary school teachers to be able to communicate well with their learners (Brock-Utne *et al.*, 2010).

### **The Language Policy in Zambia: A Literature Review**

The issue of LoI in Zambia may, perhaps, not be blamed on the colonial administration. When the colonial administration took over the affairs of running Northern Rhodesia as Zambia was called, the LoI was the mother tongue. Linehan (2005: 2), observed that ‘the issue of language and education in Zambia was fairly straight forward throughout the colonial and much of the Federal period. From 1927, only three years after the Colonial Office took over the responsibility for Northern Rhodesia up to 1963, just before the break-up of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, the policy was consistent; mother tongue was used for the first two years of primary education, followed by a dominant vernacular up to Standard 5 and English thereafter. But Mwanakatwe (2013) says before independence, the colonial government selected four vernacular languages to be used as official languages for administrative purposes. These were Ibibemba, Cinyanja, Citonga and Silozi. However, these were not the only languages in Northern Rhodesia. Zambia had no Lingua Franca and even to date, Lingua Franca does not exist in Zambia.

As at 1977, the Ministry of Education (MoE) was aware of the benefits of teaching in the mother tongue but acknowledged that the practice was impracticable for highly multilingual societies such as Zambia. Mwanakatwe (2013) noted several challenges of teaching in vernacular languages which included lack of proper teaching materials in vernacular languages, limited reading materials in vernacular languages, and the lack of authorship among Zambians. Other noted challenges were the non-availability of teachers to teach in the many local languages and the cost implications of developing teaching and learning materials. The Ministry of Education (1977) says, before 1965, English was the medium of instruction from upper grades, that is Grade 5 upwards, but was declared the medium of instruction from Grade 1. Since Zambian children had problems understanding English, teachers had to use one of the local languages to drive their point home. This was a strategy when English was the medium of instruction. The 1977 policy reforms ably recognised the difficulties of using local languages as medium of instruction citing challenges imposed by high mobility of people from one place to another thereby frustrating the child's ability to learn when they are introduced to a new language in a new locality.

However, surprisingly enough, the 2013 revised curriculum had to thrust aside all these ideas and challenges observed and came up with a curriculum which should be delivered in what is now called a familiar language from Grades 1 to 4 (Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, 2013). It looks like a new meaning had been found to replace the mother tongue concept with a 'familiar' language concept. But what is a familiar language? Isn't this the dominant language that followed two years of mother tongue instruction in the colonial era before English was introduced at Grade 5? According to the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MESVTEE, 2013), a familiar language is a Zonal language or a language commonly used by the majority of the people including children as the language of play. Apparently, the revised curriculum introduces the familiar language as a LoI from Grades 1 to 4. But is the familiar language the same as the mother tongue? Well, the familiar language may not be the mother tongue but the mother tongue is still and also is actually the most familiar language in which research shows children performing very well when instructed through it. Research shows good performance in a mother tongue as a familiar language, not any other local language the child may have learnt.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Findings**

To help provide empirical analysis to this subject, the researcher conducted a survey of 129 teachers teaching Grades 1 to 4 in the local languages of instruction in selected schools of Livingstone, Kabwe, Chibombo and Solwezi. Schools in Livingstone use Citonga as the LoI but Silozi is widely used there too. Teachers in this study attested to this observation as well. Cinyanja has also permeated the area. Selected schools in Chibombo district of Central province at border areas with Lusaka district were also involved in the study. The local LoI is Cinyanja but Cilenje is said to be widely used in the area. The situation is alike in some schools in Kabwe where Icibemba is used instead of Cilenje. Solwezi is the new copper mining town in Zambia attracting a lot of people looking for employment. Kiikaonde is used as a familiar LoI in Solwezi but teachers recorded learners from Portuguese, Indian and Ghanaian origins besides the many other Zambian local languages. The study was conducted to establish teachers' experiences of teaching through the familiar language as a LoI as expected by the new curriculum. Respondents gave responses to the following four key questions:

- (i) What is your mother tongue category? (i.e. from the seven official local languages).
- (ii) Using your registers, write how many learners in your class belong to the seven main local language categories.
- (iii) Are you fluent in the local LoI used to teach Grades 1 to 4 in this school?
- (iv) Are you fluent in reading and writing in the local LoI used in this school?

The table below shows a distribution of the respondents that participated in the study.

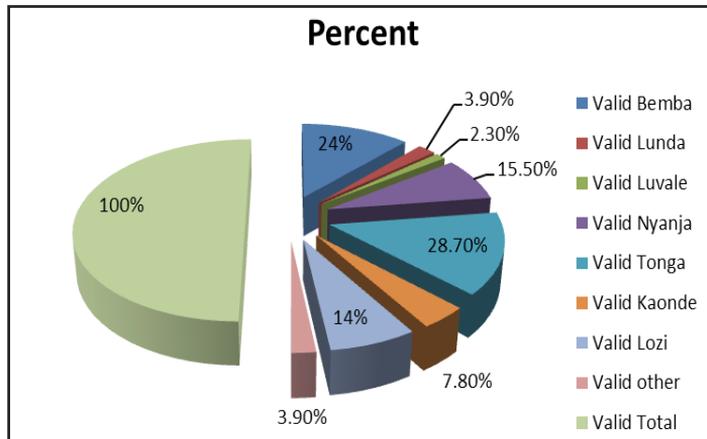
**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents (N=129)**

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Per cent</b>	<b>Valid Per cent</b>	<b>Cumulative Per cent</b>
Valid	Kabwe	14	10.9	10.9	10.9
	Chibombo	26	20.2	20.2	31
	Livingstone town	49	38	38	69
	Solwezi	40	31	31	100
	<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	

From Table 1 above, three provinces were captured; Kabwe and Chibombo Districts in the Central Province, Livingstone in Southern Province and Solwezi in North-Western Province.

In the survey presented above, it was established that Zambian teachers of different local languages were teaching Grades 1 to 4. The teachers also taught different learners from different local language backgrounds (see Figure 1 and Table 2 below).

**Figure 1: Teachers of Different Local Language Origins in Selected Schools of Livingstone, Chibombo, Kabwe and Solwezi (N= 129)**



Source: Author

The results showed that there were teachers of different mother tongue origins teaching everywhere in the country. Teachers, regardless of their tribe, teach anywhere in the country as the posting policy states. The GRZ TS Form 2 states that, ‘under regulation 37, I will be posted where I am needed and not necessarily to the province of my choice’. From the results, it does not matter who teaches lower grades. A teacher of any tribe can teach learners through the familiar language known to be commonly used in the area. From the seven main languages spoken on national radio, teachers indicated that they had learners from different tribes in their Grades 1 to 4 classes as shown in Table 2 below. The table below shows the results of the different learners from different tribes taught by teachers through the LoI in the four selected places for the study.

**Table 2: Learners of Different Local Language Origins in Selected Schools in Livingstone, Chibombo, Kabwe and Solwezi as Recorded by 129 Teachers**

	Livingstone	Solwezi	Kabwe/	Chibombo	Per cent
Bemba	335	393	515	1243	24
Chinyanja	434	125	436	995	19
Kaonde	45	532	55	632	12
Luvale	103	176	24	303	6
Lozi	505	61	93	659	13
Lunda	56	219	27	302	6
Tonga	685	80	290	1055	20
	2163	1586	1440	5189	100

*Note: Dialects were not captured in this information!*

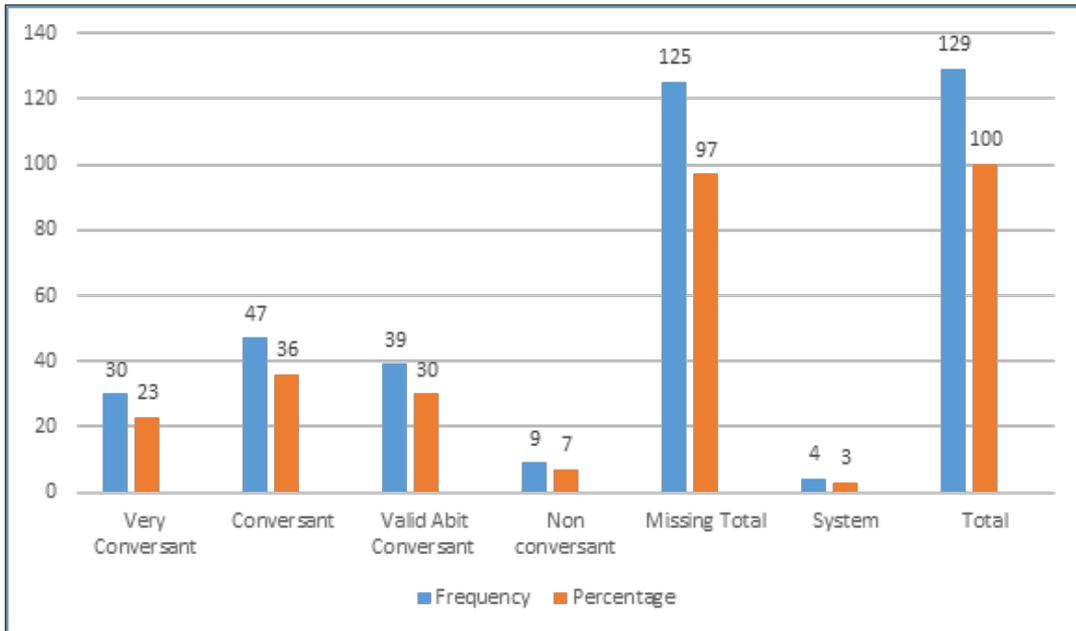
As shown in the results above, all teachers taught a heterogeneous group of learners; that is no one class had purely learners speaking one Zambian language. There are learners from different languages in classes that teachers taught regardless of the location. The results do not, however, show whether the learners of different languages speak those languages better than the local language used in the area or vice-versa. However, a very important consideration still remains, that for as long as people move from one place to another for various reasons, they are likely to face difficulties learning in the local language they find in the area they move to. As literature shows, Zambia is a highly multilingual society composed of not only the Zambian local languages but also foreign languages. In Solwezi, for instance, this study established that there was one Ghanaian, two Indians and one Portuguese speaking learners in some classes. In Livingstone, a number of learners of Ndebele and Zulu speaking languages were also recorded. Even among the seven languages commonly adopted as languages familiar to the learners on the basis that they are the main languages spoken on radio, many learners belong to different languages known as dialects. The dialects are not all close in orthography, intonation and other language characteristics as the main language, thus increasing the likelihood of affecting learning by learners who are not natural speakers of such a language called the familiar language. The adoption of the local language purported to be a familiar LoI creates a non-inclusive learning environment where some learners are likely to feel they are not part of the learning society in a particular classroom.

With such a distribution of teachers and learners of different local language origins in all schools in the country, one would wonder what language is likely to emerge one hundred years from now. People have not stopped transferring from one school to

another, from one province to another and Zambia's motto still remains 'One Zambia, One Nation.' To learn and use all seventy-three languages and dialects fluently, to teach and learn through the seventy-three local languages and dialects by each teacher and learner respectively, is an unachievable dream. To affect the quality of teaching and learning through a policy that is not inclusive creates long lasting negative effects on the education system. This needs not forgetting. Mwanakatwe, (2013: 203) warned that 'the selection of any one vernacular as a medium of instruction presupposes that teachers would be available in sufficient numbers throughout the country to teach effectively in the chosen vernacular so that the much-needed uniformity is obtained. Such a supposition is definitely unrealistic.'

Zambia continues to train teachers from different ethnic backgrounds and posts them to serve anywhere in the country in the name of 'One Zambia, One Nation' and teachers are still being trained in English. To think that these will be able to teach in a familiar language which they themselves have not been exposed to, may be illusionary. Mbewe (2015) showed two extreme contrasts of results from a study conducted to establish teachers, pupils and parents perceptions towards the use of Cinyanja as a LoI in Lusaka schools. Mbewe (2015) found that while teachers supported the use of Cinyanja, learners and parents' were for English. Further, Mbewe (2015) further discovered that a few parents still felt that their children should be taught in Ibibemba and Silozi instead of Cinyanja which is declared as a familiar language. From the 2016 survey conducted by the author of this article, it was established that although some teachers claimed that they were conversant and fluent in the local languages used in Livingstone, Kabwe, Chibombo and Solwezi, there was still a large percentage of teachers teaching Grades 1 to 4 that were neither conversant nor fluent in the local LoI, (See Figure 2 and 3 below).

**Figure 2: Whether Teachers in Selected Schools in Livingstone, Kabwe, Chibombo and Solwezi were Conversant in the Local LoI Used in the Schools**

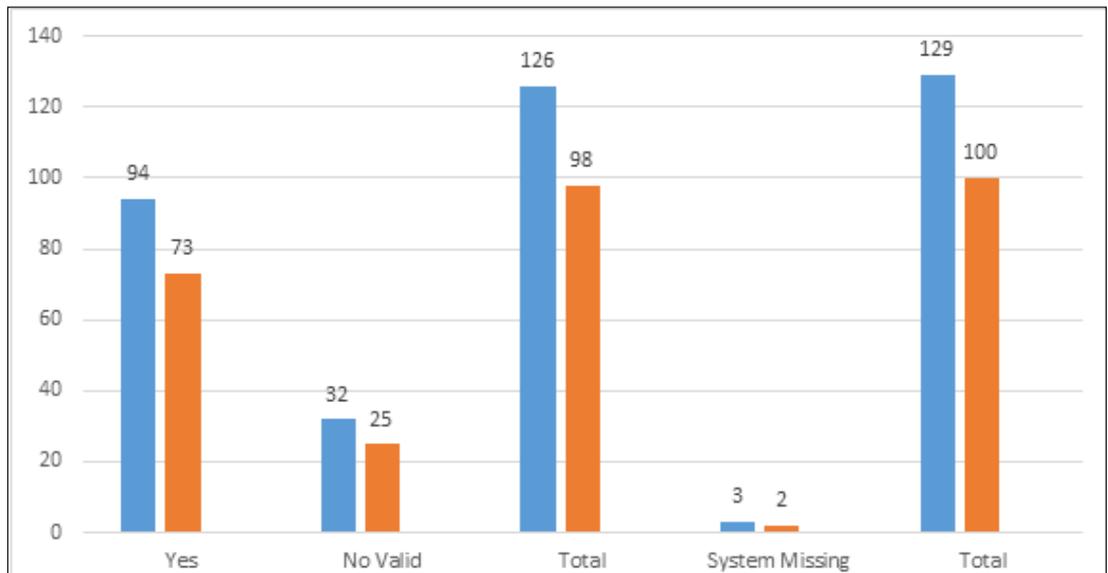


Source: Author

The results in Figure 2 above show that there is a considerable percentage of teachers that were a bit conversant (30%) and not conversant (7%) with the LoI used in the areas where they were teaching. This gives a 37 per cent total of teachers that were not conversant with the use of LoI to teach learners in Grades 1 to 4. In teaching and learning, whether the number of teachers who are conversant in the LoI is higher than the number of those that are not conversant, the impact exerted by those who are not conversant may still be deleterious.

The next figure shows similar results but in terms of language fluency, a quality necessary for teaching and learning. Language fluency necessitates a natural flow of thought when a teacher is explaining concepts to learners.

**Figure 3: Whether Teachers in Selected Schools in Livingstone, Kabwe, Chibombo and Solwezi were Fluent at Reading and Writing in the Local LoI used in the Schools**



Source: Author

When asked whether they were fluent in the local LoI used in the school, some teachers felt that they were not fluent and conversant at all. Teaching requires fluency, confidence and knowledge of the subject at hand. The results do not really show how positive the policy is as long as there are teachers who are not prepared to implement the policy effectively due to the language barrier. The impact of such lack of fluency and conversance at reading and writing in the local LoI compromises the delivery of content and skills to learners.

## Discussions

From the findings of the study, there should be a distinction between the familiar language and the mother tongue. Many studies have supported instruction in the mother tongue while others have highlighted the difficulties of adopting the familiar language approach to LoI policy. Bishop (1985) conducted a study that discovered that learners in Zambian schools performed better in Mathematics when they were taught in their mother tongue than those who were taught in English. It should be noted that the mother tongue and the familiar language are two different concepts if applied. Matafwali (2010) argued that Zambian children who are not familiar with the LoI might have problems in school learning to read particularly, if they have been to pre-school where the LoI is a third language. Njovu, Hamooya and Bwalya

(2013) equally noted that the use of unfamiliar languages in the initial teaching of literacy greatly affects the reading of the children in schools and recommended that government should ensure that the policy is well implemented in all the parts of the country. Which language is unfamiliar to children in their initial literacy that scholars are referring to? These are languages that are not a child's mother tongue, including English. For instance, Njovu, Hamooya and Bwalya (2013) observed that there were places such as Kazungula where most people speak Silozi but Citonga is used, some parts of Kabwe where Lenje is widely spoken but Ibibemba is used for teaching initial literacy, leaving wonders in the researchers as to what would happen to some parts of Muchinga province where Ibibemba is used for instruction yet Nsenga is widely spoken in the area.

Tambulukani (2011) supported the instruction of learners in a familiar language, saying, 'pupils make more progress in word reading fluency in a Zambian language and English when basic reading skills are practiced in the children's most familiar Zambian language.' He also stated that 'the differences among the several local languages are minor.' He was, however, quick to warn that familiar language should be used on experimental basis because, for instance, the Cinyanja spoken in Lusaka is a combination of borrowed words from English and other local languages. However, the policy is under implementation in all schools in Zambia since 2014.

What are the implications of this policy on practice? It is suicidal to quality education to imagine that all the seventy-three languages and dialects have such similarities more especially when such languages meet in the cities. This certainly would mean total confusion to a variety of learners with different backgrounds. Even when the numbers may be less, their right to a fluent learning process is violated by the declaration of the so-called familiar language. It is an agreed proposition that performance whether in literacy or other academic skills is best when the instruction is done in a mother tongue but the familiar language as understood in the Zambian curriculum is not a mother tongue. It can be any other language the child understands and uses for play. But it should not be ignored that the mother tongue is actually the most familiar language to anyone because it gives one the inborn abilities to manipulate their learning situations. Learning cannot be best appreciated in any other familiar language other than the mother tongue. For instance, how long would it take a child from a rural area transferring to a town school where the language is completely new? How much frustration would be inflicted on such an innocent child even when he or she does not realise it? He or she has to start on a very low note of a low performer. If such a child was an intelligent performer where he or she came from, he or she will be the laughing stock of the time. He or she will have no avenue to exploit his or her intelligence until after a long time of frustrations and struggle.

This is against the child's rights to education because the child's new classroom becomes alien. He or she can play quite well while struggling but this has deleterious effects on, especially, classroom learning. Ordinary play cannot be compared to classroom learning. While play may be a method of learning, language is a very important vehicle for the method to achieve its objectives.

The choice of dominant languages to represent all other languages especially as languages of instruction, threatens the existence of minority languages (Muzata, 2015). Such is a danger to individual and national identity. There is no better language than the child's mother tongue for effective construction of knowledge to take place (Muzata, 2013). Wilson (1996) says constructivist learning environments are places where groups of learners learn to use tools of their culture including language and the rules for engaging in dialogue and knowledge generation. Dialogue in a mother tongue makes the construction of ideas easier. Denying a child the right to learn in his or her mother tongue pulls down his or her learning desire, the desire to express himself or herself thoroughly. Thus, we deny the child the childhood ability to build his or her self-esteem and concept. Odugu (2011) notes that multilingualism that supports only select few languages of dominant groups in society marginalises the minority languages or dialects, a norm observed in India and Nigeria. The popularisation of major languages, including the world languages, threatens the extinction of minority languages (Odugu, 2011). If Zambia has observed that she can manage to overcome the resource challenges of teaching all learners in their mother tongues, why not create classes to teach learners regardless of where they stay or live in their mother tongues? Teaching through multiple languages is another alternative although the attainability of such practice may be difficult to imagine especially for poor countries. Experts show that multiple language competencies dispose the individual to more advanced cognitive functioning measured by academic achievements. Mother-language education and multilingual education requires not only policy provisions that are inclusive of all languages but also an equitable distribution of adequate resources for the development of educational materials and teacher preparation in these languages (Odugu, 2011: 14).

Several questions emerge, fifty years after independence. Zambia continues to move to and fro without a proper decision on the LoI. It is usually left to the readers to wonder whether the policy is well informed by research in Zambia or not. The challenges of using vernacular languages in highly multilingual societies such as Zambia are well documented in Mwanakatwe (2013). Mwanakatwe (2013: 206), notes that 'learning through a multiplicity of languages presents the child with daunting difficulties which often retard progress. The plight of a child who is compelled to transfer from one school to another where a different vernacular language is used for instruction can be quiet serious. A child's educational career can be ruined completely

in such a situation'. But, has the situation changed today that we can have a familiar local language being used for instruction from Grades 1 to 4? The 2012 Learning Achievement (MESVTEE) Survey Report established that 51 per cent of the learners learned in the language spoken at home while 49 per cent said they did not. The survey report cautioned implementers on the language of instruction policy implementation (MESVTEE, 2012). Certainly, situations have not changed from the time Mwanakatwe noted this as a challenge. If anything, people's movements from rural areas to towns in search of jobs, education and business have increased now than in the 70s when Mwanakatwe raised this issue.

Statistically, according to the Central Statistical Office (CSO, 2012), the 2010 Census captured 17.6 per cent Icibemba, 4.3 per cent Citonga, 61.9 per cent Cinyanja, 0.2 per cent Kiikaonde and Luvale respectively; 1.3 per cent Silozi, 1.2 per cent Nsenga, 0.4 per cent Tumbuka speaking people and many other percentages below 1 per cent of the other local languages in the city of Lusaka. In 1966, according to Mwanakatwe (2013), there were 49 per cent Cinyanja, 20 per cent Icibemba, 11 per cent Citonga, 5 per cent Silozi and other language speaking people. Perhaps Mwanakatwe combined the different dialects and the CSO gives all the dialects. From this overview, it is already difficult to declare Cinyanja as a familiar LoI in Lusaka schools alone when 17.6 per cent are Bemba, 1.3 per cent Lozi, 1.2 per cent Nsenga speakers for instance. It is still not satisfying to think that Nsenga, Tumbuka, Cichewa, and Cinyanja are the same. These language varieties do not affect the learners only, the teachers are also affected as they belong to different local language groupings.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There is no argument against teaching in local languages, especially the mother tongue. Such policies have succeeded in countries with fewer local languages than those with multiple languages. One may think this article is unpatriotic to Zambian local languages, but this article actually proposes a more inclusive approach to the local language policy and calls for more investment in teaching, learning and human resource in all the seventy-three local languages and dialects. If unattainable, it is better to embrace an alternative inclusive language, English, as has been the case, in order to level the learning field for all the seventy-three languages and dialects in Zambia. The need to respect individual identity among learners most importantly through learning in their mother tongue is not negotiable in a democracy and indeed in an ideal constructive learning environment. But, clearly, there is a big difference between a mother tongue and a familiar language, and subjecting teaching and learning in a familiar language instead of a mother tongue is against the principles of constructive learning and inclusiveness. Adopting dominant language approaches or familiar language ideologies creates a less

inclusive and intolerant society yet currently, learning should be made as inclusive as possible for all learners regardless of their origins. Language should not be used as a barrier to learning. If the familiar language is to be upheld, measures must be put in place to provide specialised teaching not only to learners but teachers as well in the new local languages they find when in new places.

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