

## **In search of High Literacy Levels in Zambian Primary Schools: Does Duration of Mother Tongue Instruction before Transitioning into a Second Language Matter?**

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### **Abstract**

The study aimed at establishing whether the period of mother tongue use before transitioning to a second language has an effect on improving literacy levels in Zambia. The study used documentary analysis in answering the research question. In this case, recent studies on medium of initial literacy in Zambia have been reviewed and selected data sets from the reviewed studies have been presented to provide an answer to this study. In one case study which was reviewed, the findings show that even after extending the period from one year to four years of using mother tongue, the majority of the learners' ability to read and write was very low. For example, results from reading and writing tests in English revealed that, 55.4% of learners scored below average in reading and 94.9% scored below average in writing. Findings also show that teachers lacked teaching and learning materials that would allow them to teach effectively, teachers were not trained on how to transition and learners had not broken through to the second language by grade five. Thus, the study concludes that regardless of how long a mother tongue is used as medium of instruction before transitioning to a second language, literacy levels may not improve unless other equally important factors are addressed. In view of the findings, the study recommends that there is need to change the transitioning model in which case translanguaging should be legitimised as a bridging language practice from grade 4 to grade 5. This implies that primary teachers should be trained on how they are supposed to transition from grade 4 to 5 in the context of translanguaging.

*Keywords: Transitional language practices, Familiar local language, Policy framework, Initial literacy, English, Grade five Teachers and Learners, Chongwe.*

### **Introduction**

The history of the Language in Education Policy in Zambia has not been a consistent one. Banda and Mwanza (2017) explain that there have been twists and turns in the history of language in education policy formulation and implementation. This started with the Missionaries who settled in Zambia around the 1800s. Although the belief is that missionaries primarily came to Zambia to spread the word of God, they also established schools and hospitals. Critically, the establishment of schools was done with the aim of teaching the indigenous people the mechanics of reading and writing so that they could read the Bible which would make their evangelism work easier. In terms of medium of instruction, the missionaries used local Zambian languages depending on the area they settled. Manchishi (2004:1) notes:

...the drive for evangelism proved extremely successful because the missionaries used local languages. The Bible and other Christian literature were translated into local languages. People chanted hymns in the language they understood best i.e. their own local languages, and even in the schools, the medium of instruction was in their own local languages at least up to the fourth grade.

While the missionaries' work and approach to medium of instruction is seen with a casual eye, it is the 1928 Phelps Stoke Commission Report which recommended the use of four local languages from grade 1 to 4 and thereafter English which stands out as the first and a more formalized Language in Education Policy in Zambia. In fact, Simwinga (2006) calls this as a landmark development in the history of language policy formulation in Zambia. See the recommendation in part below:

...the advisory Board on Native Education has agreed to the adoption of four principal native languages in this territory for school purposes namely Sikololo (Lozi) for Barotseland; Chitonga-chila for the rest of North Western Rhodesia; Chibemba for North Eastern Rhodesia; and Chinyanja for Eastern Rhodesia (Annual Report on Native Education, 1927: 12)

Manchishi (2004) add that the advisory Board also recommended that the teaching of English should start after learners have acquired the skills of reading and writing in the local language. Banda and Mwanza (2017) argued that although the declaration gave legal status and appears to acknowledge the importance of local languages in education, it also inadvertently promoted English above indigenous languages by pronouncing it the official language of government and business, and education generally, especially after grade 4 (Simwinga, 2006). However, the policy did not really lead to high literacy levels. One of the reasons was that the four and later the seven regional official languages were not comprehensive to every learner in the country even by region. This meant that some learners were still learning in an unfamiliar language although the medium of instruction was a Zambian language.

Thus, in 1953, another policy change was instituted. This was a three tier in education language policy. This meant that pupils were taught in the most dominant local language in the area which was not necessarily a regional official language for the first two years of education. This was followed by the regional official language from the third to the fourth year. Finally, English took over as medium of instruction from grade 5 onwards (Simwinga, 2006, Banda and Mwanza, 2017, Mwanza, 2016). The rationale behind this policy was to provide a slow and steady transition of pupils from the home language to the regional language and later, English.

Bwalya (2019) explained that the aforementioned type of language education policy where pupils are taught in a less dominant mother tongue for the first two years and thereafter in a more dominant language before graduating to English only, is referred to as bilingual education and specifically transitional bilingual education and Ansre (1972) explains that instruction through a local language is seen as a transitional phase prior to instruction in English. Despite the sound justification behind the 1953 policy, there is no evidence that the policy was successful in raising literacy levels among primary school pupils. Regrettably, this policy was short lived as there was a different policy by 1966.

The 1966 Language Act stipulated the use of English only from grade one to University. The 1966 Language Act stated that "the English language shall be used as the medium of instruction in all schools...unless the Minister otherwise directs, in any particular case, the vernacular language or languages be used as the medium of instruction in grades 1, 2, 3, and 4 at that

school” (Education Act, 1966:69). To go with this policy, the government designated seven Zambian Languages namely Bemba, Kaonde, Lunda, Luvale, Lozi, Nyanja and Tonga as regional languages that should be taught as school subjects (Manchishi, 2004). Note that the 1966 Language act was as a result of the 1964 UNESCO report which recommended that “the medium of instruction should be English, from the beginning of schooling” (UNESCO, 1964: 105) cited in Linehan, (2004: 2). On the aspect of literacy, this policy was a failure as it separated the child’s home from the school and the drastic change in language use on the part of the learner meant that the policy was more problematic than it proved useful.

The low literacy levels emanating from the 1966 English medium only Language in Education Policy were highlighted both in the 1977 Education Reform document and in the 1992 Focus on Learning Document (Bwalya, 2019). Surprisingly, although the 1977 reforms recognised the benefits of initial literacy learning in a mother tongue as opposed to learning in English, the government found the situation impracticable when it stated that “Although it is generally accepted by educationists that learning is best done in the mother tongue, this situation has been found to be impracticable in the case of every child in multilingual societies such as Zambia” (GRZ, 1977: 32). In this case, English continued to be the language of instruction. Indirectly, this meant that the chance to raise literacy levels was blown away despite having acknowledged the weaknesses of using English as a sole language of classroom instruction.

The low literacy levels got worsened by 1992 as observed by Simwinga (2006) that by 1992 it had become increasingly clear that the use of English as a language of instruction was not working well particularly at lower primary school level. It was the same view held by the government at that time when it stated that “ an emphasis on learning through English means that the majority of children form hazy and indistinct concepts in language, mathematics, science and social studies” (MOE, 1992: 27-28). With this in mind, the 1992 recommendation provided the teacher with greater freedom to determine the main local language to be used as language of instruction. The 1992 recommendations were an attempt to democratise the classroom through the use of languages that learners were familiar with in order to raise literacy skills among primary school children. By 1996, there was continued recognition that the exclusive use of English was not helpful. Thus, the 1996 Educating Our Future policy stated:

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....In order to foster better initial learning, to enhance the status of Zambian languages, and to integrate the school more meaningfully into the life of local communities, each child will be required to take a local language from grade one onwards...all pupils will be given an opportunity to learn initial basic skills of reading and writing in a local language; whereas English will remain the official medium of instruction” (MOE, 1996:39-40).

The recommendations of the 1996 Language in Education Policy were implemented through the Primary Reading Program (PRP) that officially started in 1999 with its three components namely New Break Through to Literacy (NBTL), Step In To English (SITE) and Read On Course (Roc) (Constable et al, 2000; 2001; MOE, 1998). By this time, the medium of instruction in grade one was a Zambian regional language while English became the medium of instruction from the second grade onwards.

Despite the many policy changes all aimed at improving literacy levels in Zambia, the literacy levels were reportedly to have fallen to as low as 33 percent (MoE: 2008). The Ministry of Education (2013: 30) noted that the previous programmes had not yielded the desired results when it stated that “The inability by learners to learn content subjects is because many of them are not able to read and write”.

Since 1999, a number of studies have been done to review the benefits of using a Zambian local language in the first grade before receiving instruction in English by year 2. While Most of the studies have shown that literacy levels have remained low, they have pointed out that the one year period of using one a familiar is not adequate to transfer literacy skills in Zambian languages into English. For example, Matafwali (2005, 2010) found that children in Lusaka were not able to read and write at expected desirable levels. She argued that the one year period of using a Zambian language was not adequate to achieve the literacy aims. Mwanza (2012) also conducted a study to establish whether the use of Cinyanja as a sole language of classroom instruction in Lusaka was appropriate. While the findings showed that the Cinyanja was not adequate because both teachers and pupils could not speak standard Nyanja, the study argued that the one year period of using Cinyanja was problematic as it did not give both teachers and pupils to learn enough Cinyanja to teach or receive instruction in the language. Thus, it was thought that if the period was extended, problems associated with language were also going to be solved. Mubanga (2012) made similar claims in her study which was conducted in Chongwe. Due to mounting arguments from researchers and academic regarding the claimed short period of using mother tongue which was thought to be the central problem to the continued low literacy levels under the New Break Through to Literacy program, the government revised the policy in 2013. Thus, from 2014 onwards, the language in education policy was revised and recommended that the medium of instruction from grade 1 to 4 be a Zambian familiar language while English will take over from grade 5 onwards. As stated earlier, this was under the belief that extending the period from one year to four years of local language use was going to raise literacy levels.

Since the language in education policy has consistently been changing in Zambia, all with the aim of providing better education with high literacy levels as the ultimate target, the question is: Does the period of mother tongue use before transitioning to a second language really matter in developing literacy skills in primary school children?

### **The Literacy Condition in Zambian during the One Year Mother Tongue Instruction (2000-2013)**

The period between 2000 and 2013, the language in Education policy in Zambian was that a local Zambian language was the medium of instruction in grade one. From grade two onwards, English became the medium of classroom instruction. The expectation was that learners would acquire enough English oral proficiency during the first year in order to learn using the language in the second year. Secondly, it was also expected that learners would learn to read and write in a Zambian language to an extent that they would be able to transfer the skills of reading and writing into English by grade two. Note that this was a change from the previous policy where English was the medium of instruction from grade one onwards. Below, I present studies which were done between 2000 and 2013 on the literacy condition during the same period.

Matafwali (2005) studied the nature and prevalence of reading difficulties among grade three pupils in both Lusaka Rural and Urban Schools. Results showed that only a small proportion of children

were able to read at expected level. Further, there was no major difference between rural and urban pupils as both groups showed poor reading skills. The reading difficulties which children encountered included letter-sound knowledge, word reading and serial rapid naming of numbers. For example, only 18.9% of the children could successfully blend sounds into words. Further only 29% of the children could successfully read one syllable words while the rest had difficulties with 26.4% of the children failing to even make an attempt to read. In a nutshell, the findings from Matafwali shows that by 2005, learners in Lusaka Rural and Urban could not read at desirable levels. The study recommended changing instructional strategies in the teaching of literacy, improvement of teacher preparation and starting exposing children to literacy material earlier in life through pre schooling.

Mubanga (2010) conducted a similar study to Matafwali but located it in Northern Province of Zambia. The aim was to unravel the nature and prevalence of reading difficulties among grade two pupils in Northern Province. The study found that grade two pupils who participated in the study faced a number of reading difficulties such as letter identification, letter writing, letter-sound discrimination, phonological awareness, word identification, pronunciation, spelling and reading comprehension. These reading difficulties were attributed to 'local language and NBTL skill interference', teacher incompetence and lack of pupils' readiness to learn reading.

Mwambazi (2011) conducted another study in Northern Province in Mpika and Mbala Districts. The aim of the study was find out the factors and nature of reading achievement among grade two pupils in selected primary schools of Mpika and Mbala districts. The findings established that grade two pupils were not able to read and write at their grade level. For example, 51.1% of the respondents scored below average in letter knowledge. In letter-sound association or knowledge, 60.2% of the pupils scored below average. Of these, 23.4% scored between 0-2 of the 20 possible items. In short, the study established that grade two pupils in Mpika and Mbala could not read at an expected reading level. According to the study, this was due to factors such as absenteeism, shortage of teaching and learning materials, untrained teachers in PRP methodologies, inadequate time allocated to literacy classes and the use of unfamiliar language of instruction. Mwambazi (2011) argued that these factors accounted for the failure by grade two pupils to break through to literacy grade two. In the same year, Mwanza (2011) found similar results in Lusaka where she sought to compare the reading performance between grade one pupils with preschool background and those without preschool background under the New Break Through to Literacy (NBTL). As hinted earlier, The NBTL was the literacy program under which the medium of instruction provided for the use of a local language for the first year of education before transitioning into English by grade two. The findings of the study were that there were low reading levels among grade ones irrespective of whether they had preschool background or not.

Later, Kachinga (2012) conducted a study to measure the reading performance in Cinyanja of grade one pupils between those pupils who were taught by an indigenous language teacher and those who were taught by a non-indigenous language teacher. The word indigenous teacher was used in this study to refer to a first language speaker of Cinyanja while non indigenous teacher referred to a non-first language speaker of Cinyanja. The results showed that although those who were taught by a teacher to whom Cinyanja was a first language performed better than those who were taught by a non-first speaker of Cinyanja, the difference between the two groups was minimal. Overall, the results shows that a significant number of pupils failed to read Cinyanja as expected. Statistically, only 55% of the children who were taught by the indigenous language teacher read above average while 41.5% of the pupils taught by a non-indigenous language teacher. Clearly, there was no significant difference as 45% of those taught by an indigenous language teacher read below average

and 58.5 of those who were taught by a non-indigenous language teacher read below average. The point here is that whether the teacher is a first speaker of the medium of instruction or not, primary school pupils under the NBTL programme still failed to break through to literacy. Chibamba (2012) observed that lack of language proficiency in the medium of instruction by both teachers and pupils, lack of teaching materials and inadequate preparation by teachers to teach literacy were the major reasons why pupils were failing to read and write in lower primary schools in Lusaka, Zambia.

The message coming from the reviewed studies is that despite the government's revision of the language in education policy to make a local language as medium of instruction in grade one, literacy levels in most parts of the country remained low. Different studies have considered different variables such as first language of the teacher, preschool background, rural vs urban areas as well as studying pupils at different grade levels. All the results point to the fact that literacy levels between 2000 and 2013 remained below average. Therefore, the duration of mother tongue use in this case did not matter in improving literacy levels. In other words, the change to teach literacy in mother tongue in grade one before transitioning into English at grade two did not yield any positive literacy results. The same studies have consistently pointed out lack of teaching material, poor teacher preparation, lack of familiarity with the language of instruction by both teachers and pupils as well as teacher incompetence in the literacy teaching methodologies as the major reasons why literacy remained low.

Regardless, the government revised the policy in 2013 because there was a feeling that the one year of using a local language was not enough for pupils to acquire literacy skills both in the regional official language and in English. It was also felt that the short period of transition was a reason for lack of pupils' ability to acquire English oral language proficiency in order to be taught in English at grade two. In fact, Mwanza (2012) recommended that the government needed to extend the period from one year to two or more. Similarly, Tambulukani (2015) also argued that the one year period of using mother tongue before pupils transition to English was not enough. This was after his study found that pupils could not make substantial progress in literacy due to lack of familiarity with the medium of instruction and that the one year period was not adequate to prepare children to receive instruction in English. He therefore recommended that the period be extended from one year to two years or more. Note that although Tambulukani's study was published in 2015, it is clear that the paper was written before 2014 because the recommendation of extending the period from one year to two years could only be made before 2014 when the policy provided that a local language be the medium of instruction in grade one. However, the point here is that following various research outputs and arguments for the extension of the period, the government of the republic of Zambia revised the policy and extended the period of mother tongue use from one year to four years. Thus, the current policy is that learners in primary school learn in the local language from grades 1 to 4 and transition to English in grade five. In the next section, I present studies which have been done after the policy was revised to see the condition of literacy levels after 2014.

### **The Literacy Condition in Zambia during the Four Year Mother Tongue Instruction (2014 to Date).**

After the policy was revised in 2013 and implemented in 2014, a number of studies have been done to review the situation and find out whether or not the literacy condition has improved. For example, Phiri (2015) conducted a study to establish the nature and prevalence of reading difficulties among grade four pupils in Lusaka District. The study reported that writing abilities of grade four pupils in the sampled schools were low and below their grade level. A total of 50 (64.05%) had difficulties writing words and sentences from the BASAT test while 61 (76.25%)

could not write the tested story correctly. In other words, they could not write any narrative. The study further noted that the poor reading and writing skills among grade four pupils were due to inadequate teacher training in teaching reading and writing, lack of teaching and learning materials, teacher incompetence in the appropriate instructional strategies to teach literacy, poor learner backgrounds and inadequate time allocated to the teaching and learning of literacy. Mutale (2016) conducted a study whose aim was to examine the reading skills acquired by grade two learners in Cinyanja under the revised curriculum framework in Lusaka District of Zambia. She reported that reading skills were poor especially among pupils in schools which lacked adequate and appropriate teaching and learning materials compared to schools which were resourceful. In fact, regarding teacher ability to teach reading, Kamalata (2016) conducted a study in North Western Province of Zambia on the relationship between phonological awareness and reading ability. Some of the findings were that teachers were actually not competent in phonological awareness because phonological awareness missed from the teacher training curriculum which they followed and that those who had such knowledge acquired it through continuing professional development (CPD).

Kombe (2017) and Kombe and Mwanza (2019) studied primary school teachers' preparedness to implement the 2014 revised literacy in Kitwe District in the Copperbelt Province and found that teachers were actually not prepared. Teachers did not receive any training to understand and implement the policy. Moreover, they were not even consulted during the policy formulation. More critically, the government's attempt to train teachers through trainers of trainers did not work as those who were trained to train others did not actually do so. Thus, teachers in primary schools were teaching literacy based on common sense knowledge. In fact, some of the teachers were not even teaching literacy based on the new methodologies but the NBTL which was abandoned in 2014. Mutolwa (2019) found out that it was not only teachers who were not prepared to implement the 2014 revised literacy policy as teacher educators in colleges of education were also not prepared and competent to train teachers in literacy and language. Just like teachers, lecturers in colleges of education reported that they were not consulted or involved by government during the revision of the policy. Thus, they had not revised the teacher training curriculum to respond to the needs of the revised primary school language literacy guidelines. The same study revealed that some primary schools did not allow trainee teachers to teach literacy in schools during teaching practice because some primary schools claimed that trainee teachers did not have enough competence to teach literacy according to the revised policy. This is interesting as it shows the power relations between teacher training institutions and placement schools and the contradictions which characterise such relationships. At the centre of this contradiction is the realisation that placement schools consider trainee teacher unprepared to teach literacy.

Four years after the policy was revised and the first intake had transitioned into grade five under the new policy, it was necessary to conduct a study to find how much progress had been made in literacy levels. In this regard, Zulu (2019) conducted a study in Chongwe District in Lusaka province with the aim of analysing the transition language practices which teachers were using in grade five, one of the objectives was to assess grade five reading and writing abilities. Two separate tests were administered. One was a reading test and another was a writing test. The reading test comprised 50 words which pupils needed to read. These words were selected from grades 1 to 4 text books which were used in primary schools. Ideally, these were words which grade five pupils had learnt in the previous grades. The results showed that 34 learners scored 0, representing 21.3%, 11 learners scored 1 representing 6.9%, 2 learners scored 25, representing 1.3%, 8 learners scored 42 represented by 5.0%, 3 scored 49 represented by 1.9% and 1 learner scored 50 representing 0.6%. In short, the findings showed that while 91 pupils (55.6%) scored below average, 69 learners (44.4%)

scored average and above. This means that the majority of pupils read below average. On the other hand, results from the writing test were that 205 pupils (94.9%) scored below average, only 11 pupils (5%) scored above average. This means that the vast majority of the pupils could not read at their grade level while only 5% of the children could read at an average level.

Zulu also collected some interview data from the teachers to get their voices on the reading and writing abilities of grade five pupils in selected primary schools. The following are some of the verbatim responses as reported in Zulu (2019) study:

**RT1:** *the learners' ability to read and write is bad because this is the time they are changing from local language to English. They spell in Cinyanja*

**RT6:** *the learners' ability to read and write is very bad because only about 5 to 10 learners can speak, read and write.*

**RT9:** *the learners' ability to read and write in English is very poor, because they are used to local languages. For example in grade 2 and 3 when we use to teach them in Cinyanja, if asked them a question when they answered in English we use to tell them to answer in local language. I am sure that situation contributed to this poor English command.*

**RT15:** *learner ability to read and write is low because of the over use of local Zambian languages from grades 1 to 4.*

**RT16:** *learners' ability to read and write in English is bad, because English is introduced at a late stage. Early introduction of English can help the situation.*

**RT11:** *the learners' ability is difficult to tell because reading they can read but they do not understand what they read. And when it comes to writing they spell words in Cinyanja especially those with similar pronunciations. E.g Cake is read as "Chake"*

*Source: Japhet Andrew Zulu (2019) Dissertation, pages 29-30.*

Clearly, the views of the teachers above are consistent with the reading and writing assessment results presented earlier. A similar study was done in Chibombo District of Central Province by Vigirio Bwalya. Bwalya (2019) also intended to analyse the classroom language practices adopted by teachers in a bid to linguistically democratise the classroom. A total of 60 teachers were asked to indicate in likert scale whether learners were able to read and write in their classroom. Of these, 53 teachers (88.3%) stated that their pupils could not read and write at their grade level while only 7 teachers (11.7) indicated that their pupils could read and write. Strikingly, these results are consistent with the findings by Zulu (2019) who tested pupils in the two skills and found that the majority of pupils in Chongwe could not read and write at their grade level even after the policy was revised from one year to four years of local language use as medium of instruction in lower primary school.

From the interview data, the majority of teachers explained most pupils could not read and write at grade when they were supposed to learn using English medium. Interestingly, one teacher (RT15) points out that using local languages as medium of instruction from grades grade 1 to four is problematic and a cause for the lack of reading progress. This is particularly important because the reason why the duration of mother tongue use was extended in 2014 was because the one year duration was found to be too short to realise the literacy goals. Another teacher (RT9) also explains that using mother tongue in grades two and three retards pupils progress in English. According to the teacher, pupils must transition into English by the second year or third grade. Another teacher (RT16) suggests that that early introduction of English would really help to improve the literacy situation. In short, all the respondents point to the fact that the use of local languages as medium of instruction for four years before transitioning to English is the cause for the current lack of progress



in literacy levels in Zambian primary schools. As argued earlier, this is contradictory because the current policy was premised on the fact that teaching literacy in a local language for the duration of one year was inadequate and was the one of the major causes for low literacy levels recorded between 2000 and 2013. Before that, the use of English from grade one to University was blamed for the low literacy levels in Zambia as it was argued that such a policy separated the child from the home and that it also weakened the child's cognitive powers which would best be expressed in the familiar language before transitioning into English. At this point, it is easy to see why Zambia has consistently changed and revised language in education policies because each policy which comes, regardless of the justification for the policy, is criticised for being responsible for low literacy achievements in the country. As a result, the search for high literacy levels has seen back and forth movements regarding policy formulation and implementation. That is the reason why Ramirez (1992) was correct when he argued that regardless of the nature and timing of the transition, if it is not handled with care, it can be problematic for learners. Thus, it is not the duration of mother tongue use before transitioning into a second language which matters, but other factors which are more critical to literacy development than duration of mother tongue use. I will discuss these factors in the next section of this paper.

### **Does the Duration of Mother Tongue Instruction before Transitioning into a Second Language Matter in Literacy Development in Pupils?**

From the preceding sections, what one can state without fear of contradiction is that the duration of mother tongue instruction before transitioning into a second language does not matter in the developing reading and writing skills in primary school children. In Zambia, for instance, there have been different phases ranging from using mother tongue for initial literacy teaching, using local unofficial language for first two years and an official local language for a further two years before transitioning into English, English only from first grade to University, using a local language for only the first year before transitioning into English at grade two to finally and currently using a local language for the first four years before transitioning into English at grade five. All these phases and changes have not yielded improved literacy results in Zambia. In fact, this is not a Zambian problem alone. It is a problem prevalent in almost all sub Saharan African counties whose language policies have been influenced by coloniality where the period after independence have witnessed the struggle between indigenous African languages and foreign languages persist with the blame mostly placed on African languages.

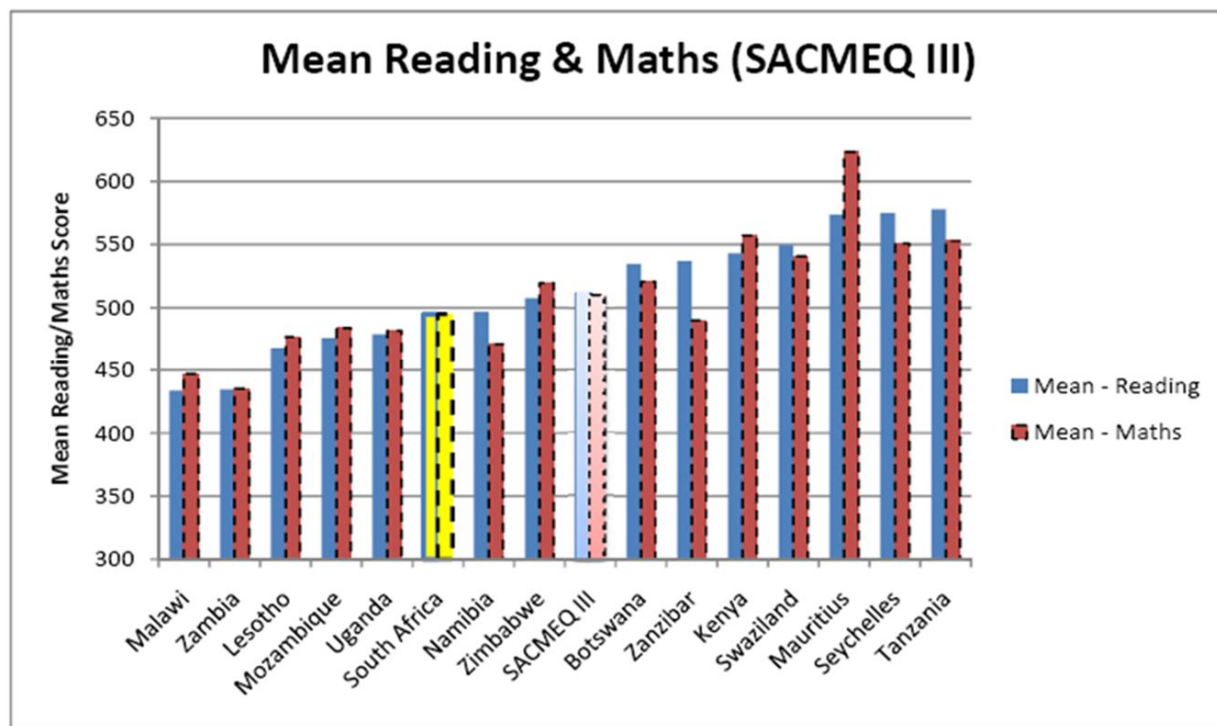
In Sub Saharan Africa, there is also a continuous division between those who advocate for indigenous language usage in schools and those who advocate for English medium from the beginning of primary education. Thus, depending on who wins the argument at each particular time, a policy change is instituted and either the African indigenous language or the colonial language takes primary role in literacy teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the constant changes and revisions of these policies have been present since education was introduced. In Malawi, Mtenje (2013) provided an account of the language policies changes that have taken place in Malawi with people's language attitudes toward African languages on one hand and English on the other. A look at the Malawian language in education policy and its history shows lack of consistency with literacy levels remaining low just like Zambia.

In Mozambique, Salvador (2012) noted that by 1997, only 45.3% of grade two learners could attain the basic objectives of the Portuguese language course and further stated that pupils who failed to read and write failed to progress during national assessments. Salvador (2012) citing the SACMEQ report (1995-2010) reports that the reading performance of grade six pupils in Mozambique was

low as follows: pre-reading at 2.3%, emergent reading at 3.9%, basic reading at 11.2 %, reading for meaning at 28%, interpretive reading at 32.7%, inferential reading at 16.1%, analytical reading at 5% and critical reading at 0.1%. Clearly, these literacy levels were too low.

In Uganda, the SACMEQ report (2000), literacy levels were reported to have been very low. The reading performance of grade six pupils was as follows: pre reading at 7.2%, emergent reading at 18.3%, basic reading at 21.8%, reading for meaning at 21.5%, interpretive reading at 14.8%, inferential reading at 8.2%, analytical reading at 5.3% and critical reading at 2.9%. What I see here is that countries in Sub Saharan African generally have low literacy levels.

The Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ III, 2007) literacy report shows that most countries in Sub Saharan African have low literacy levels. The report covers, Malawi, Zambia,, Lesotho, Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zanzibar, Kenya, Swaziland (Eswatini), Mauritius, Seychelles and Tanzania. See the table below on the literacy performance of these countries:



SACMEQ III, 2007

What is consistent is that literacy levels have not been high. Even those countries which have their literacy levels above average, they are marginally above average which means that a good number of their learners still cannot break through to literacy even by grade six.

Since the observation in this paper is that the duration of mother tongue instruction does not matter in improving literacy levels in these countries, what then really matter in the quest to improve literacy levels especially in Sub Saharan Countries whose language policies and education systems are mainly premised on colonial language ideologies and frameworks? I provide the answer to this question below:

The answer to the literacy problem in Sub Saharan Africa is the provision of learner centred pedagogies which will first require the decolonisation of the curriculum and language in education policy and secondly, it will require the decolonisation of teachers and pupils language practices in the classroom which will allow for translanguaging whose end results will be the democratisation of the classroom and epistemic access by the pupils. Note that most bilingual or multilingual education systems currently prevailing in Sub Saharan African countries are premised on monolingual/monoglot language ideologies and practices. These policies advocate for the use of one language at a time before moving to using another language at another time. During that time, it becomes illegal to use a language which has not been officially designated to be used for instruction during that phase of education. The coloniality with which African language policies are designed and enforced does not allow for multilingualism and multilingual voices in the classroom yet Sub Saharan Africa is inherently multilingual. In the context of migration, it is no longer valid to talk about language zoning because people as well as languages cannot be bound to one region. Mobility of people implies that languages are also constantly moving. Therefore, education policies which provide for regional languages as opposed to familiar languages are exclusive and a major reason for the continued low literacy levels in sub Saharan Africa. In fact, Cummins (2010) call policies which allow for one language to be used after the other as two solitudes. The point here is that languages as resources means that they are not exclusive especially in multilingual classrooms. Thus, it is necessary that sub Saharan Africa adopts Translanguaging as a multilingual classroom language strategy to open up the classroom space for every pupil regardless of their language backgrounds or abilities.

By definition, Baker (2011: 39) defined translanguaging as “the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages.” Garcia (2009a: 41) views translanguaging as “the use of children’s full linguistic repertoire to make meaning without thinking of the fact that they have one language that is different from the other.” Similarly, Canagarajah (2011: 401) noted that Translanguaging is “the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system.” As a pedagogic practice, translanguaging means that teachers should allow for the use of other languages represented in the classroom even if such languages are not official. If pupils cannot express themselves in the official language or cannot understand the explanation, they should be allowed to ask or speak in the language they understand in order to help them access learning. It is important to note that teaching does not serve policy but learners. Thus, the rigidity normally exercised by teachers and education systems only result into symbolic violence, lack of learning by the pupils and the ultimate result is low literacy levels after assessment. In many African countries including Zambia, monolingual language practices as influenced by language policies which are premised on monolingual/Monoglot language ideologies are the reason why there is little progress in early grades. This is so because what are said to be regional official languages in most African countries are in fact not familiar languages to some children. Ironically, while the policy will claim that instruction is taking place in an African language with an assumption that every child is understanding it, the truth is that a lot of children cannot function in most regional languages especially that in most cases, regional languages are politically assigned following political and administrative boundaries instead of purely language based regions in terms of pupils familiarities with local languages. Translanguaging engenders multilingualism, multiculturalism and most importantly, epistemic access through provision of learner centred pedagogy.

Notwithstanding, there are implications for adopting translanguaging. Firstly, teachers should be trained in translanguaging so that they know when and how to use the language practice. This means that teacher training institutions should infuse Translanguaging in their teacher training curriculum. Doing so will not only prepare teachers for the practice, but it will decolonise their minds, most of which are persuaded to think that indigenous African languages cannot co-work with foreign languages in official domains. As Mwanza (2017) advises, teachers' attitudes towards languages and policies is key to the successful implementation of a policy. (Another implication for the adoption of translanguaging is that there is need for refresher courses for in-service teachers to familiarize them with the practice and its academic benefits for the learner. As Manchishi and Mwanza (2018) puts it, teachers are supposed to be prepared relative to the job they will do and the contexts in which they will serve after graduating from their teacher education programme.

The other factor which has been key in retarding literacy levels in sub saharan Africa is lack of teacher competence to teach reading and writing to early grades. This is mainly caused by the poor teacher training which they received. In Zambia for example, teachers are not trained to go and teach in any particular language even when there are seven clearly known regional official languages. Deployment of teachers is also done based on available vacancies instead of language ability of the teacher relative to the language used in the region where the teacher will be teaching. In most cases, this results into teachers being sent to schools where they cant speak the medium of instruction. Many studies in Zambia (Mwanza, 2012; Mubanga, 2012; Matafwali, 2005; Banda and Mwanza, 2017) all reported teachers who could not speak the medium of instruction thereby struggling to teach. This blind approach to teacher training and teacher deployment account for much of the lack of literacy achievements in schools as teachers struggle to teach. In Mozambique, Salvador (2012) also reported poor teacher training as one of the problems confronting the literacy agenda in Mozambique. In Malawi, Msango (2010) also found teacher training to be problematic and he argued that poor teacher training affected literacy skills development in the country. He further recommended that both pre-service and in-service teachers in Malawi needed to be trained in literacy teaching. The teacher factor in terms of his pedagogic content knowledge is concerned accounts much for the success or failure of the school system. In addition to teacher training, it is imperative that whenever policies are being changed, teachers and teacher educators are involved. The lack of coordination or disjuncture between policy makers and teachers and teacher educators on the other hand is detrimental for the education progress of children. The consequence of this is that teacher training institutions will prepare teachers in a vacuum while teachers in schools will be ignorant of the new changes and incompetent to implement new curriculum. The final result is high failure rate among pupils who unfortunately, have to bear the burden of poor and uncoordinated education systems.

Finally, the aspect of teaching and learning materials adversely affects the literacy agenda in sub Saharan Africa. In Zambia, several studies done on literacy (Kalindi, 2005, Matafwali, 2005; Zimba, 2007; Mwanza, 2012; Mubanga, 2012; Mulenga, 2012) have all reported lack of teaching and learning materials as a factor hindering the effective teaching and learning of literacy. Kombe (2017) and Kombe and Mwanza (2019) revealed that in 2014, the government rolled out the revised literacy policy before they prepared and distributed books. Thus, schools lacked materials to implement the new policy while other schools used old materials meant for the old curriculum. This was not progressive as the two curriclums were different in terms of the lesson procedure and how literacy should be taught. Mutolwa (2019) also complained that the current education language of initial literacy policy is suffering a setback due to lack of teaching and learning materials. In Malawi, Msango (2010) reported that there was a critical shortage of literacy teaching and learning

materials in Malawi which negatively affected literacy teaching and learning. Commenting on the literacy situation in Malawi, Msango (2010:56) noted that “the situation was worsened by the inadequacy of literacy text books where seven pupils were seen by the researcher sharing one text book during group work in reading and writing sessions”. This situation does not provide a conducive environment for the teaching and learning of literacy. In Mozambique, Salvador (2012) also complained of lack of teaching and learning materials and stated that the shortage was one of the most contributing factors to the continued low literacy levels in Mozambique. It is important to note that literacy texts books are a fundamental component of literacy success of child as they help in learning to read as well as reading to learn. In fact, the whole idea of reading and writing means that there are texts to read. In the absence of texts, it becomes impossible to teach the mechanics of reading.

### Conclusion

The central question in the paper was whether or not the duration of mother tongue instruction before transitioning into a second language mattered in literacy acquisition of primary school pupils in sub Saharan Africa. Through a review of a wide range of literature, it can be concluded that the duration of mother tongue instruction does not matter. Several durations and variations have been tried in countries such as Zambia with no real gains in literacy. What stands out as key to the development of literacy is the adoption of multilingual language policies, practices and ideologies which would allow translanguaging as the legitimate classroom language practice. Secondly, there is need to improve the competencies of teachers in literacy teaching through both pre service and in service teacher training. Finally, there is need to provide adequate and appropriate teaching materials to support the teaching and learning of literacy in skills.

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