

The Language Strategy in the Zambian Educational System from 1924 to 2014

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Abstract

Language policies within the Zambian education system have shifted in focus over the years. Two main schools of thought have dominated the debate regarding the language of instruction for Zambian schools. One school of thought favors the use of English as the language of instruction while the other camp supports the use of local languages for instruction of core subjects. This paper reviews language policies and language policy documents for Zambia dating from the pre-colonial era to the present-day democratic environment

Introduction

The Country known as Zambia today was previously called Northern Rhodesia. It is a landlocked country situated in Southern Africa. The size of the territory is 752,000 square kilometers; about the size of France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland combined. Its neighbors are: DR Congo to the North and North West, Tanzania to the North East, Malawi to the East, Mozambique to the South East, Zimbabwe to the south, Botswana and Namibia to the South West and Angola to the West. Northern Rhodesia was a protectorate formed by the amalgamation of the protectorates of North-Western Rhodesia and North-Eastern Rhodesia. From 1890 up to 31st March 1924, the territory was administered by the British South Africa Company (BSAC). It only became a colony of Britain on 1st April 1924. On 24th October 1964, Northern Rhodesia obtained its independence from Britain and changed the name from Northern Rhodesia to Zambia.

Language Strategy in the Educational System of Northern Rhodesia Before 1924

During the pre-colonial era, early western missionaries provided formal education in Northern Rhodesia. The first school was opened in 1883 by Frederick Stanley Arnot of the Christian Mission in Many Lands. The British South African Company neglected formal education during the time it ruled the Territory. The only school that the BSA Company established was the Barotse National School in 1907 at Kanyonyo (Manchishi, 2004). All the other schools were left entirely in the hands of missionary agencies. In fact, the Barotse National School remained the only government school up to 1929.

The Missionaries used indigenous languages as media of instruction in all the schools under their control, up to the fourth year of primary education. Even though the desire by the local young men and women was to be taught in English, the missionaries opted to teach them in the indigenous languages (Carmody, 2004). Therefore, wherever the Missionaries opened up a School, they used local languages as media of instruction. As a result of this language strategy, the church's evangelization programme proved extremely successful and fulfilling for the Missionaries. Furthermore, because of this language strategy, the Missionaries were able to create a wealth of literature in the local languages.

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According to Snelson (1974), the missionaries did not only make an effort to study the languages of the local people, but also to produce materials in the vernacular. Consequently, the Bible and other Christian Literature were also translated into local languages. When a mission station opened anywhere in the Country (Northern Rhodesia), the first thing the missionaries did was to study and write the dominant language in that area (Carmody, 2004). Thereafter, they began to teach in the chosen local language. The local languages were taught as subjects and also used as media of instruction in the first four years of primary education. The Missionaries did not give priority to English because they believed that a local language was a powerful linguistic instrument at their disposal to impart knowledge to any local community (Carmody, 2004). Records show that, throughout the pre-colonial era, the missionaries were the main 'suppliers' of education to Africans all over Northern Rhodesia before 1924. As for the B.S.A Company, they simply followed the Missionaries language policy. For instance, at the Barotse National School, built by the BSAC, Silozi was used to teach as the medium of instruction from the first year of primary school to the fourth year. English only replaced Silozi as the medium of instruction in standard five (Manchishi, 2004).

Language Strategy in the Educational System of Northern Rhodesia from 1924 To 1953

When Northern Rhodesia became a colony of Britain in April 1924, a Commission, The Phelps-Stokes Commission, had already been assigned by the Colonial Office in London to examine the educational system in all the colonies of Britain. The Commission was also requested, *inter alia*, to advise the London Office on how the British Government could improve the education system in its colonies. As a matter of fact, the Commission's task was three fold. The First task was to investigate the educational needs of the people in the light of their religious, social, hygienic and economic conditions. The second was to ascertain the extent to which the needs of the people were being met. The third one was to assist in the formulation of plans to meet the educational needs of all native races (Snelson 1974).

On the issue of languages, the Phelps-Stokes Commission recommended that English be given the status of official language for both education and government day to day business. The commission insisted that the indigenous languages be used for the preservation of national values and self identity on the part of the colonized people. The commission further stressed the great importance of using local languages as a sure way of preserving the good side of African customs, ideals and above all for preserving self-respect of Africans (Snelson, 1974). Following the Phelps- Stokes Commission's recommendations, four indigenous languages were selected to serve as official Zambian languages in schools. The four languages were: CiBemba, CiNyanja, Citonga and Silozi. These were the four languages chosen by the British Government to be used as media of instruction in African Government schools for the initial four years of primary school.

As a result of the Phelps-Stokes Commission's recommendations, the Colonial Government created, in 1925, a Sub-Department of Native Education to co-ordinate and to supervise the education of the Africans. Missions were encouraged by the Government to establish teacher training centers. The emphasis was put on mass education. As a result, more and more pupils were being admitted into schools. In 1930, the Department of Native Education introduced English in African Schools, mainly due to the fact that there was no Lingua-Franca in Northern Rhodesia. Nevertheless, the English language could only be introduced after the skills of reading and writing had been taught in the familiar local languages (Manchishi, 2004). The aim of education became Community Centered. The Colonial Government's desire was to promote the advancement of the community as a whole through the improvement of agriculture, the development of health, the training of people in management of their own affairs and the inculcation of the ideals of citizenship and service (Carmody, 2004). Therefore, formal education was crucial and so was the issue of language strategy.

By 1939, approximately 42,000 children had been enrolled into primary school. It is also in that same year that the first 15 students were enrolled at Munal Secondary School. Available records show that this was the first secondary school programme in Northern Rhodesia. By 1945, Northern Rhodesia boasted of not less than 116,000 children in primary schools. Concerning the medium of instruction in schools, the Colonial Government put emphasis on the local languages, just like the Missionaries did. However, the Colonial Government gradually began to acknowledge the increasing demand for English in the territory. They also recognised the importance of English in preparing the young men and women for employment.

The general practice in the school system of Northern Rhodesia during the colonial era was that the local language should be used as a medium of instruction in the child's early years of schooling. The pupils continued to learn in the vernacular until they entered the 5th year of primary education, when English replaced the local languages as the medium of instruction.

Linehan (2004) indicates that the issue of language and education in Northern Rhodesia was straight forward throughout the Colonial rule. In fact, from 1927, three years after Northern Rhodesia became a British Colony, up to 1963, the language strategy in Northern Rhodesia remained predictable. In other words, the vernacular was used to teach in primary school up to standard 4. The British Government reiterated, in 1943, their language strategy by recommending that Child's learning be occupied by vernacular teaching during the first four years of primary School. One of those recommendations stipulated that English should be taught as a subject in the 4th year of primary school and as a medium of instruction in the 5th year.

Manchishi (2004) reports that by 1950 the language policy in Zambian schools was slightly modified, in the sense that the mother tongue was now to be used as a medium of instruction only during the first two years of primary education; then, a dominant vernacular took over up to standard 4. English replaced all the local languages in the 5th year.

Language Strategy during the Federation of Rhodesia And Nyasaland (1953-1963)

The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland included Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (currently Malawi). It entered into force in 1953 and ended in 1963. During this period, the principal educational need of the people of the entire territory was to read and write. Literacy was, therefore, not only seen as the gateway to employment but also to modernization (Carmody, 2004). Education in Northern Rhodesia was clearly divided. The Territorial Government was responsible for the African education while the education for the other races came under the Federal Government.

It is during the time of the Federation that English was gradually being introduced to the early primary schooling as a subject. As early as the second year of primary school, pupils were given two thirty minutes periods of English. In fact, towards the end of the Federation in 1963, the Government of Northern Rhodesia requested UNESCO to study the education system of Northern Rhodesia and suggest ways of improving it. The UNESCO sponsored team recommended that English be adopted as the sole medium of instruction from the first day of primary education. Some scholars argue that the adoption of English as the medium of instruction from grade 1 undermined the importance of the vernacular in Northern Rhodesia and rendered the school process more alien to the local people (Carmody, 2004).

Language Strategy in Zambian Schools from 1964 To 2014

At independence, in October 1964, there was still no Lingua-Franca in Zambia. The new government was, therefore, faced with the difficulty of finding an appropriate language of instruction in all primary schools across the country. By then, the education system in Zambia had 8 grades at primary school level which included two pre-grade one. Secondary school started from form 1 up to form 5. The Ministry of Education had not only acquired control over the entire formal education, but also over the Curriculum Development Centre, the Examination Council of Zambia and the Zambia Educational Publishing House.

As the newly independent state of Zambia required more educated labour, the Government had no option but to invest heavily in education at all levels. According to the 1963 Census, 76.6% of all men in Zambia and 95.6% of all women were illiterate (Carmody, 2004). The new Government had the mammoth responsibility to develop its citizens and community. Consequently literacy became a high priority for the first Government of the Republic of Zambia.

1966 Education Act

English was officially adopted by the new Government of the Republic of Zambia, through the 1966 Education Act, as the medium of instruction, right from grade 1 till the end of tertiary education.

1977 Educational Reform

In 1976, there was an attempt to revert to the colonial system through government sponsored Draft Educational Reforms. The leadership of the country was convinced beyond any doubt that English was detrimental to educational achievement. However, in the final document of 1977, it was agreed that English be maintained as a unifying factor, because of the large number of ethnic groups in Zambia. In the Reforms, teachers were also given the freedom to explain concepts that might prove difficult to be understood by pupils in one of the dominant official Zambian languages.

Focus On Learning, 1992

The next attempt to reverse the language strategy came in 1992 when the Government of the Republic of Zambia published a new document of Educational Reforms, namely, "Focus on Learning". This document supported arguments in favour of Zambian languages. Even though this document was formally adopted by Cabinet in 1992, no attempt was ever made to implement the proposed language strategy (Linehan, 2004).

1994 Curriculum Reforms

In 1994, the Curriculum Development Centre published a document on the primary school curriculum entitled "The Structures of the New School Curriculum" in which it was again recommended that the vernacular languages be used as media of instruction during the first 4 years of primary education. According to Manchishi (2004), the recommendation was not implemented and, therefore, died a natural death.

1995 Conference on Reading

The 1995 Conference on Reading noted low reading levels among primary school going children. According to Shay Linehan (2004), a study conducted, in 1995, by the Ministry of Education revealed that 25% of Grade 6 pupils could read at defined minimal levels and only 3% could read at desirable levels. Linehan (2004), therefore, concluded that the first 30 years of English, that is from 1965 to 1995, had been less than satisfactory. As a result, the Ministry of Education took a number of measures to provide remedy to the malaise in the Zambian education system. One of the measures concerned the upgrading of local languages, by including them among subjects that counted towards selection to grade 8. This recommendation has since been implemented.

1996 Educating Our Future

In 1996, the Ministry of Education produced another policy document entitled "*Educating Our Future*". This document replaced "*Focus on Learning*" document of 1992 and set initial literacy in familiar language as a child's right while maintaining English as the medium of instruction. *Educating Our Future* (1996) recommended that "All pupils be given an opportunity to learn initial basic skills of reading and writing in a local language, whereas English would remain as official medium of instruction (MOE 1996) .

1997 New Curriculum

In 1997, the Government published a new Curriculum for the entire school system in Zambia. This document recommended that local languages be compulsory from grade 1 to grade 9 and optional in the high school. However, the recommendations were not implemented.

In 1998, a pilot study was undertaken in two districts of the Northern Province of Zambia, namely: Mungwi District and Kasama District. In this study, the local language, Cibemba, was used to teach initial literacy to grade 1 pupils. The results of the study revealed that pupils were able to read in grade 1 and that their level in grade 2 was equivalent to the level of grade 4 pupils who were subjected to English as a medium of instruction during early stages. As a result of the pilot study, literacy in local languages was scaled to all schools in Zambia, under a Programme titled "Primary Reading Programme" (PRP) and comprising three components, namely: New Breakthrough to Literacy (NBTL), SITE and ROC.

2000 Basic Curriculum Framework

In 2000, the Curriculum Development Centre published another document on primary curriculum entitled "*The Basic School Curriculum Framework*". Below is part of what this document recommended, inter alia:

Grade 1, literacy shall be taught in a familiar language and English as well as Zambian languages are additional languages subjects. From Grade 2 literacy shall be taught in English, while Zambian language literacy skills continue to be enhanced.

2012 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework and 2013 National Literacy Framework

The 2013 *National Literacy Framework and the 2012 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework* proposed the following language strategy in Zambia. For Grade one pupils, the document proposes that the medium of instruction in all learning areas be local languages. For grades 2 and 3, the content subject and literacy should be taught in Zambian local languages, while English language and literacy in English should be taught in English. In grade 4, content subject and literacy in Zambian languages should be taught in local languages. English language and literacy in English should be taught in English. Nevertheless, from Grades 5 to 7, content subjects should be taught in English. At this last level, only Zambian languages will be taught in local languages and these will be adopted according to common languages found in a given area/region.

Current Situation and Challenges

Many studies have been conducted on the issue of language strategy in Zambia (Kashoki, 1978, 1989, 1990; Linehan, 2004; Manchishi, 2004; Nkossa, 1999). Similarly, many recommendations have been made, yet very little progress has been made. On political grounds alone, it is very challenging to adopt any of the 73 vernacular languages in Zambia as a medium of instruction in primary schools without exciting tribal passions and creating serious discontent and unrest (Carmody, 2004). Since January 2014, the Ministry of Education in Zambia has begun to implement the recommendations contained in the 2013 National Literacy Framework, which include, inter alia, the use of local languages as medium of instruction from grade 1 to grade 4.

Though Zambia has a total of seventy three ethnic groups speaking a myriad of different languages, only seven of these languages have been receiving financial and material support from the Government. These are: Cibemba, Citonga, Cinyanja, Lunda, Luvale, Kikaonde, and Silozi. The seven languages are used as subjects in schools, for broadcasting on radio and television, as well as for publications in vernacular newspapers. The seven languages are also widely spoken in political circles and used to interpret in courts of law. Furthermore, the seven major Zambian languages are also the only ones recommended for teaching as vernacular subjects at secondary school level. In principle the idea is brilliant but in practice, only a few schools have the means to implement the proposed language strategy. For instance, Zambia is a highly urbanized Country and it is not possible for all the children living in a multi-lingual urban area to speak the dominant language. In addition, there is still lack of training among existing teachers to enable them handle them handle the new situation. As for teaching materials, they are not yet adequate.

Strategy Concerning Other Foreign Languages in Zambia

From Independence to-date, French has been the only International language, apart from English, which has been allowed to be taught in government schools in Zambia. Available records indicate that French language was introduced in African schools, as a subject, in the educational system of the then Northern Rhodesia in 1953. At that time, French was offered to a class of 25 Form 1 students at Munali Secondary School for boys, in Lusaka and Chipembi girls in Chisamba. In 1964, when Zambia obtained its Political Independence from Britain, the teaching of French spread to 12 other secondary schools.

By 1991, French was taught in not less than 100 secondary schools throughout the country. This spectacular growth prompted the then Minister of Education to openly declare: "Indeed, the demand for French is greater than the Ministry of Education in Zambia can easily cope with". Today, 61 years after the introduction of French in the Zambian Curriculum, we are witnessing a decline vis-à-vis the growth of French in the educational system and the decline is so visible that it has become a serious source of concern to many educationists as well as authorities in government; especially that French is one of the working languages of COMESA, SADC and the AU to which Zambia belongs. In the new Curriculum of 2012, pupils will have to choose between three foreign languages, namely: French, Portuguese and Chinese.

Conclusion

During the pre-colonial and colonial eras, the language strategy was clear and straight forward as it tilted towards the local Zambian languages. After independence, there was a shift in strategy. The Government of the new Republic of Zambia tended to favor English rather than the indigenous languages. Starting from January 2014, the trend is being reversed. The educational system in Zambia has reverted to the pre-colonial and colonial era approach, which had also been supported by UNESCO (1953). Local languages are now officially being used as media of instructions in the various provinces of Zambia, starting from Grade 1 up to Grade 4 at primary school level. English is being used as the medium of instruction in Grade 5 upwards. There is currently a debate in the Country for and against this arrangement. As for us, in spite of the challenges it poses, we accept the decision because empirical evidence is there to show that children learn easily when a mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction, especially in the early stages of their education (Primary School).

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