

**LINGUISTIC OPPRESSION THROUGH ZONAL LANGUAGE MONOPOLY: A CASE OF KAFUE RURAL GRADE 1 LITERACY CLASSES**

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**ABSTRACT**

The study aimed at exploring linguistic oppression through zonal language monopoly in Kafue rural literacy classes. The study used the descriptive research design under qualitative research method. The sample was 12 grade one teachers. Data were collected using interviews and classroom observations and was analysed thematically. The study revealed that language oppression caused language barrier, poor participation and delayed cognitive development. Further, language monopoly excluded learners who spoke other languages, limiting their participation and academic achievements. The linguistic oppressive practices experienced were in relation to language marginalization and curriculum bias. Only Nyanja textbooks and materials were available for use in class. The existing solutions on linguistic practices that teachers used in Kafue rural literacy classes were code-switching and peer to peer translating. Therefore, zonal language monopoly was not found to be appropriate for use in grade one literacy classes. The implications of these findings are that language policy reforms are necessary to support linguistic diversity. Teachers also need training on inclusive language practices and language support strategies. Community involvement may promote language diversity and address linguistic challenges. The study recommends that in this linguistic minority area, code-switching and peer-to-peer translating is seen to be fertile in promoting learning outcomes, language diversity and inclusivity.

**Keywords:** Linguistic Oppression; Linguistic Diversity; Zonal Language; Linguistic Minority; Language Monopoly.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

In a linguistically and culturally diverse landscape of Zambia, the importance of language cannot be over emphasised as it denotes a culture where people use their native language to interact with each other within and beyond their ethnic groups. In a classroom setup, language is believed to play a central role in learning. It is for this reason that during pre-independence era, learners were taught in familiar local language for the first four years (Mkandawire, 2017).

However, Zambia being multilingual has continued facing challenges regarding suitable policy on LoI since pre-independence (Gordon, 2014). These challenges on language policy led to the introduction of Primary Reading Programme (PRP) in 1999 by the MoE. Literacy instruction in this programme was done in a local Zambian language familiar to the learners. The use of familiar local language for literacy instruction was supported by research and the Ministry of Education policy, *Educating Our Future* (1996). The PRP was meant to address the language problem

associated with the teaching of initial literacy aimed at improving literacy levels among school going children at lower and middle basic in Zambia (Mkandawire, 2017). However, the PRP failed to improve literacy levels among school going children in both English and Nyanja language because of factors related to family, pupil, teacher and school (Chipili, 2016).

Pulinx, et al. (2017) contended that educational policies which were based on a stringent monolingual ideology were problematic. The researchers believed that policy on LOI affects teachers differently and their beliefs varied according to schools. The assertion is supported by Rogers (2014) who opined that the learning of more than one language at a young age and of learning subjects through a language which was not the first language was detrimental. This is confirmed by Hoominfar (2014) who revealed that the absence of mother languages in Iran's education system has caused some problems for participants in both the academic field and identity issues. From the foregoing, it clearly shows that incorporation of mother tongue in the education system promotes academic success. This perspective is crucial as Mwiinga and Mwanza (2024) avow that teachers need to recognize learners' multilingual backgrounds by making use of Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) Strategies in order to help linguistically diverse learners access learning.

Further, Mumpande et al. (2019) observed that adopting languages that were not common in another predominantly speaking area results in the isolation and marginalization of learners, who are denied the right to education in the classroom context, leading to negative attitudes towards schools and high failure and dropout rates. The observation was true to what Mataka, et al. (2020) alleged that learning and teaching using a second language contribute to weaker cognitive and academic development. This is more reason Madonsela (2015) claim that the capacity to use language is unique from one individual to another, by way of individual's exposure to language.

Furthermore, Chibesakunda, et al. (2019) opined that learners performed poorly in literacy due to the fact that the zoned language was unfamiliar to learners in that area where it was used as a medium of teaching literacy. This observation was confirmed by Chinyama (2016) who contended that nearly all learners mispronounced Bemba words because of the interference of Namwanga which is their L1. Learners were saying '*ecipuna*' instead of saying '*icipuna*' (chair). These findings a true reflection of what Nyimbili & Mwanza (2021) affirmed that teaching of literacy using translanguaging practices in grade 1 multilingual class was associated with challenges like the mismatch between the language of instruction and dominant learner's familiar languages that existed in the classroom; rigidity of the language policy which was based on monolingualism throughout the learners' learning process; strict monolingual based assessment which only tested skills in the regional language and inadequate teaching and learning materials which supported monolingual language learning. Silavwe et al., (2019) asserted that language policy overlooks the community's actual language of play, which could be useful in class, as a result, learners have low literacy levels.

In addition, Nyimbili, Mungala & Sakala (2023) claim that teacher faced pedagogical challenges such as inadequate teaching and learning materials, low literacy levels among learners, L1 interference causing code mixing in the works of the learners, negative attitude of the learners towards the subject and word for word translation when handling translation exercises. This is linked to the findings of the study by Mwiinga (2024) who show that teachers in an effort to use

MTB-MLE strategies faced a number of challenges such as inadequate materials, unfamiliar concepts in the mother tongue, inadequate preparation time on the part of teachers, and over enrollment. Other scholars like Nyimbili and Tembo (2021) asserted that teachers were forced to use Nsenga in their teaching because learners provided answers in Nsenga instead of the Cinyanja which was not familiar to them. It is for this reason Nyimbili (2021) contends that monolingual language practices negatively affected learner's literacy performance.

Besides, not all government primary schools are located in communities where early graders can sign or speak a zonal language. Despite the language policy being good, some Zambian learners whose familiar languages are not one of the seven zonal languages used in schools are experiencing language oppression. In other words, if learners cannot use the resources they bring to class, particularly command and proficiency of their native language, their academic success gets affected. This assertion is supported by studies which revealed that literacy levels have been low among early grade learners for a long time (SACMEQ, 2010; USAID/Zambia, 2018; 2022; Mkandawire, 2022; Silavwe et al. 2019; Chipili, 2016). Learners from linguistic minority groups need a flexible language policy that could be of benefit to them. The current language policy does not support this practice in Zambia. Therefore, it was important to look at the sociolinguistic of the minority grade one learners in Chiawa zone and how they were linguistically oppressed through zonal language monopoly.

## **2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to investigate linguistic oppression through zonal language monopoly on grade one learners who were speakers of the minority language in Chiawa zone of Kafue District.

## **3. METHOD AND MATERIALS**

A qualitative approach was suitable for this study and the study adopted the descriptive phenomenological research design. Descriptive phenomenology is a research methodology that focuses on capturing and describing lived experience for a group of people. The study population included all schools and teachers in Chiawa zone of rural Kafue district, Zambia. The total sample size was 12 teachers who taught lower classes from the four sampled primary schools. Each of the sampled schools provided 3 teachers who were interviewed and classroom observation conducted upon to have a better understanding on the linguistic oppression affecting learner performance through zonal language monopoly in Chiawa zone.

Therefore, interview guide and classroom observation schedule were the two types of data collection instruments the researcher employed in the study. The researcher held twelve interviews with grade one teachers in classrooms and recorded the sessions using paper and recorder. The researcher conducted all interviews within a two-week period, scheduled at intervals to allow analysis of data between each session, in accordance with theoretical sampling principles. In order to avoid disruption of learning at each school, the researcher begun by conducting classroom observation before interviews with the teacher. Thus, the researcher transcribed data as the sessions were held, and the preliminary analyses informed subsequent themes. The researcher was a nonparticipant observer in the four classrooms which recommended by Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2023) when conducting a study in a language class. The researcher held four classroom observation within a two-week period with each session lasting 40 minutes. Observation findings

were recorded on paper following the semi-structured questions to facilitate coherence with the teacher interview.

The themes found in the data were then brought together through selective coding in order to show how they related to one another and were analysed thematically. After data analysis, emergent patterns, concepts, and participant explanations were compared to the theory chosen for the study. Ethical approval was sought from Chalimbana University Ethical Committee. Thereafter, the researcher obtained an introductory letter from the Assistant Dean Postgraduate to conduct a study. In order to go into schools, permission was sought from the District Educational Board Office of Kafue District who contacted and informed the sampled school headteachers about the visit of the researcher and the purpose of study. In schools, the researcher availed his introductory letter to the head-teachers who called upon targeted teachers. The researcher introduced himself and asked the teachers for consent. In the classrooms, the researcher was introduced as one of the learners which created a natural environment for data collection. Informed consent was sought from the participants, and they were guaranteed that their responses will be anonymous and will be kept confidential.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

##### **4.1 How is Linguistic Oppression Affecting Learner Performance through Zonal Language Monopoly in Grade One Literacy Classes of Kafue District?**

The research question intended to ascertain the opinions of teachers on how linguistic oppression affected learner performance through zonal language monopoly in grade one literacy classes in selected primary schools of Kafue District. The research question was answered by teachers through interviews and classroom observation. These tools were used to ensure there was data triangulation in the study. Participants presented their own views on the topic and subsequent questions asked.

##### **4.1.1 Findings from the Interviews with Teachers**

Participants were asked how the use of Cinyanja affected acquisition of literacy skills on grade one learner performance in a predominantly Goba speaking community. The results revealed a range of opinions regarding linguistic oppression affecting learner performance through zonal language monopoly in grade one literacy classes. Participants established that the use of Cinyanja presented challenges such as language barrier and poor participation. Further, the use of zonal language delayed cognitive development making learners struggle to understand and process information. It was observed that most often, other learners became anxiety causing demotivation. Furthermore, teachers engaged gifted multilingual learners to interpret concepts to their peers who were not familiar with the language of instruction. From school 1, Teacher 3 said:

*Zonal language monopoly is not helping us so much when it comes to teaching grade one learners, especially during their first term in school. Learners are not able to use it in class as it is not the language they are familiar with. Teachers engage multilingual learners to assist in interpreting the concept into Goba language. Although this approach improves the ability of teachers to both teach and communicate with their*

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*grade one learners, it was unfavorable because a teacher is expected to communicate effectively to their learners. This situation affects and delays learner performance.*

From school 2, Teacher 2 observed:

*Some words in Nyanja which are also used in Goba may mean different things, for example the word 'nvura', for the Goba learners it means water whereas in Nyanja 'nvula' is rain. Although the intonation is different, young learners may not realise it. The other example word is 'mulungu' which means white man in Goba yet, in Nyanja 'mulungu' is God. So this confuses both the learner and the teacher.*

From school 3, Teacher 3 noted:

*I face challenges when teaching Cinyanja because my learners' home language is Goba. Normally, when Cinyanja is introduced to the learners, they find it challenging because they are not familiar with it. Performance is affected when they are not able to elicit meaning from the introduced Nyanja word.*

From school 4, Teacher 10 indicated:

*The use of zonal language makes learners fail to participate fully. This affects their performance. Further, learners at times feel uncomfortable when certain words are introduced to them as such words may sound insulting. The moment the Nyanja word is mentioned that may be an insult in Goba language, the whole class yells at the teacher and says you are insulting. Therefore, the teacher has to explain the meaning of the word in Nyanja to make them understand.*

Participants were also asked to mention common Goba words that were different from Cinyanja. It was established that there were a number of Goba words that were mostly used in school that differed from Cinyanja. Further revelation showed that certain Goba words were similar to Cinyanja words yet had different meaning causing miscommunication between the teacher and the learner. From school 1, Teacher 3 said.

*There are so many common Goba words that differ from Cinyanja that are used in a classroom set up. For example, in Goba, we say, 'mwamuka sei' to mean 'good morning' in English whilst in Cinyanja, it is 'mwauka bwanji. Other words used in communication are such as: 'mwamuka' to mean 'mwauka', translated as 'being awake' in English; 'mulisei' to mean 'mulibwanji', translated as how are you in English.*

From school 2, Teacher 5 mentioned:

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*The Goba word, 'kunonoka' to mean 'kucedwa' in Cinyanja, translated as 'being late' in English. The other commonly used Goba word is 'uya' to mean 'bwera' in Cinyanja, translated as 'come' in English. Some Goba words have the same spellings yet have different meaning. For example, the word 'mulungu' in Goba refers to a 'Whiteman' whereas in Cinyanja it is referring to 'God.' This causes miscommunication between the teacher and the learner.*

From school 3, Teacher 9 said:

*The common Goba words in class are such as 'kudeidza' to mean 'khumphunzila' in Cinyanja, translated as 'to learn' in English. 'Kunyola' means 'kulemba' in Cinyanja, translated as 'to write' in English. 'Wawana' in Goba means 'you got it' in English, while in Nyanja, the word is 'wapedza.'*

From school 4, Teacher 11 observed:

*Words such as 'nyola,' 'gala,' 'kwamba,' and mudzidzisi were commonly used in class. The word 'Nyola' means 'lemba' in Cinyanja, translated as 'write' in English. The word 'gala' means 'nkhala' in Cinyanja, translated as 'sit' in English. The 'kwamba' means 'tota' in Cinyanja, translated as 'clap' in English. The Goba word 'mudzidzisi' means 'mphunzi' in Cinyanja, translated as 'teacher' in English.*

Participants were further asked to mention how linguistic oppression was affecting learner performance through zonal language monopoly in grade one literacy classes. The findings demonstrated that the learners' lack of knowledge in Nyanja caused anxiety and low self-esteem affecting classroom participation. The language of instruction impeded them from learning effectively since they had not acquired enough vocabulary which they could utilize in class. Further, some teachers had not acquired enough vocabulary in Goba language and could not utilize it when they were unable to communicate adequately in Chinyanja, the official language of instruction. This showed that zonal language delayed promotion of learning. This was observed from the responses provided by the teachers from the interviews: From school 1, Teacher 3 from said:

*Learners take time to learn the Cinyanja vocabulary which is affecting their performance in class. The language of instruction is new and only heard from the classroom because no one used it in the community.*

From school 2, Teacher 4 said:

*Learners failed to participate fully in class when the teacher asked learners to respond to his questions using Cinyanja. Their performance would be poor if the teacher did not alternate between Goba and Cinyanja.*

From school 3, Teacher 8 noted:

*It is quite difficult for learners to understand instructions in the language they rarely use in their home. For instance, I am not very conversant in both Cinyanja and Goba yet expected to teach effectively. This delays the learning process because both the teacher and the learners are learning new languages.*

#### **4.1.2 Classroom Observation Data**

It was observed that learners in all the four schools interacted freely using Goba language even when the teacher used Nyanja. For instance, learners were heard saying Goba words such as ‘vapa’ to mean ‘go away’, ‘uya’ to mean ‘come’, ‘nyola’ to mean ‘write’, ‘vunza’ to mean ‘ask’ and ‘gala’ to mean ‘sit’. Meanwhile, these words mean differently in Cinyanja: yenda ‘go away’, bwera ‘come’, lemba ‘write’ funsa ‘ask’, nkala ‘sit’. However, their responses were given in Cinyanja although some learners from school 2 kept quiet and watched the teacher. This demonstrated that some learners had difficulties in understanding instructions given in the zonal language. This was true to what teacher 2 experienced in class.

#### **5.1 Discussion of Findings**

The study established that teachers used Nyanja to teach grade one learners because it was the official language of instruction for Kafue district. However, the use of Nyanja caused nervousness, poor participation and miscommunication among learners who had not fully developed the Nyanja vocabulary and failed to express their wish especially during their first term in school. This language gap between Nyanja, LOI and Goba, L1 delayed the learning process. Since LOI delays learning in Chiawa zone, teachers abrogated its directive to save learners’ linguistic rights. This is in tandem with Pulinx, et al. (2017) who observed that educational policies which were based on a stringent monolingual ideology were problematic. The researchers believed that policy on LOI affects teachers differently and their beliefs varied according to schools. A stronger adherence to monolingualism was found to trigger teachers to have lower expectations about their students but not about their ability to teach. This assertion is also supported by Nyimbili (2021) who contended that monolingual language practices negatively affected learner’s literacy performance. This was confirmed in some classes when learners failed to read some words, thus exhibiting low literacy levels in the community and regional languages.

The findings of the study also established that schools had textbooks and other teaching and learning materials in Nyanja which teachers used giving no room for learners to appreciate their L1. This has academic repercussions both on local cultures and on international relations. Early graders were subjected to learning two languages, the L2 and L1 when they had not yet fully developed the desired vocabulary in both performed poorly. This claim is supported by Rogers (2014) who found that the learning of more than one language at a young age and of learning subjects through a language which was not the first language was detrimental. This is more reason other scholars like Nyimbili & Tembo (2021) asserted that teachers were forced to use Nsenga in their teaching because learners provided answers in Nsenga instead of the Cinyanja which was not familiar to them. There is a possibility that languages with smaller number of speakers are doomed

to being lost and replaced by a national language. Supporting such languages calls for the teachers to realise that learners have a right to access knowledge in their local languages despite the policy discriminatory tendencies of not appreciating the emergent literacy learners come with to school. Therefore, as Mwiinga and Mwanza (2024) submit, teachers should be liberal innovative enough in classrooms by employing a variety MTB-MLE strategies to meet learners' needs.

The findings of the study further established that there were a number of Goba words that were mostly used by learners in school that differed from Cinyanja, and some teachers had not acquired adequate Goba vocabulary to use when they needed to emphasize points in a language learners understood. The use of Nyanja is not promoting effective learning process, it is new to learners. The findings are supported by Hoominfar (2014) who showed that the absence of mother languages in Iran's education system has caused some problems for participants in both the academic field and identity issues. Communities were formed of different ethnic groups who spoke different languages. In alignment to this assertion, Nyimbili, Mungala & Sakala (2023) claim that teacher faced pedagogical challenges such as inadequate teaching and learning materials, low literacy levels among learners, L1 interference causing code mixing in the works of the learners, negative attitude of the learners towards the subject and word for word translation when handling translation exercises. Therefore, monolingual approach to policy on language of instruction was not only discriminatory but also oppressive to the learners whose language is not similar to the prescribed regional language. Learners fail to grasp the concept leading to poor performance in class.

It was established that the adopting languages such as Nyanja in a predominantly Goba speaking community caused some learners hate school and schools recording high level dropouts as some could not understand the concept because certain Goba words were similar to Nyanja words yet had different meaning causing serious miscommunication between the teacher and the learner. This is in line with Mumpande et al. (2019) who observed that adopting languages that were not common in another predominantly speaking area resulted in the isolation and marginalization of learners, who were denied the right to education in the classroom context, leading to negative attitudes towards schools and high failure and dropout rates. This clearly demonstrates that the use of Nyanja, denied the learners' right to education in the classroom context, leading to negative attitudes towards school. This further demonstrates that the Zambian language and literacy education policy is developed under the principle of viewing multilingualism as a problem to the teaching and learning process. With global changes and population increase, there is need for the language and literacy policy to embrace global trends and appreciate multilingualism and its planning.

The study established that learners who are introduced to Cinyanja, LOI and L2 find it challenging because they are not familiar with it and are not able to elicit meaning out of its new vocabulary. Language nervousness caused by inadequate vocabulary amongst learners affects their academic performance. In support of this, Mataka, et al. (2020) proved that learning and teaching using a second language contribute to weaker cognitive and academic development. The foregoing is not in line with an experiment which Nyimbili (2021) conducted and found that learners whose first language was not the language of instruction if introduced to literacy in the community language performed better than the learners who were forced to learn in an alien language. The Goba



speaking community is under linguistic oppression which needs to be attended to through policy and perhaps linguistic practices which can bring about effective learning. Learners attend primary literacy lessons for the purpose of learning a language instead of being taught using the language they know which makes them fail to learn in the school system.

Further findings of the study established that learners' manipulation of sound was based on the familiarity of sound found in their community and in their language. Teachers used Nyanja to introduce the phoneme of the day although learners were encouraged to bring out sounds in their language. The use of Nyanja made learners fail to participate fully and affected their performance in literacy. This is in tandem with Madonsela (2015) who noted that the capacity to use language is unique from one individual to another, by way of individual's exposure to language. From the above mentioned, it is clear that early graders who are exposed to L2 as a language of instruction face serious academic challenges because they have to learn the language first before using it.

It was established that learners could not fully participate in the language they did not fully understand, and they needed time to master the sounds in Nyanja in order to breakthrough. Learners interacted freely using Goba language even when the teacher used Nyanja. Because of Goba inclination, learners were heard saying 'vunza' instead of '*funsa*', 'gala' instead of 'nkala' and failing to say '*kunyumba*' but said '*kumba*'. This demonstrated a strong L1 interference between Nyanja LOI and Goba L1. Chinyama (2016) supports the findings by who noting that nearly all learners mispronounced Bemba words because of the interference of Namwanga which is their L1. Learners were saying '*ecipuna*' instead of saying '*icipuna*' (chair). Teachers faced difficulty to understand what their learners were saying as most of them (teachers) did not know Namwanga. In a linguistic minority area, there is need for educators to support learners' linguistic background in order to promote learning through the use of relevant multilingual learning practices which are not discriminatory.

The study established that the teachers' ability to teach was aided by their familiarity with the Nyanja language of instruction and the ability to understand some Goba vocabulary coupled with the capability of some learners' understanding of Cinyanja. Learners who were familiar with Cinyanja interpreted the concepts to peers using Goba a local language they understood better. However, Mwiinga (2024) alleged that teachers in an effort to use MTB-MLE strategies faced a number of challenges such as inadequate materials, unfamiliar concepts in the mother tongue, inadequate preparation time on the part of teachers, and over enrollment. This is more reason Nyimbili & Mwanza (2021) claim that teaching of literacy using translanguaging practices in grade 1 multilingual class was associated with challenges like the mismatch between the language of instruction and dominant learner's familiar languages that existed in the classroom; rigidity of the language policy which was based on monolingualism throughout the learners' learning process; strict monolingual based assessment which only tested skills in the regional language and inadequate teaching and learning materials which supported monolingual language learning. This correlates with the findings by Silavwe et al., (2019) who reported that language policy overlooks the community's actual language of play, which could be useful in class, as a result, learners have low literacy levels. This is evident that monolingual ideologies in a linguistic minority area cannot promote learning as learners have demonstrated. This also shows that learners have the potential to breakthrough if they are taught in the language they understand better.

Based on the findings of the study, Ruiz's Language Orientation Theory (1984) supports the findings on linguistic oppression affecting learner performance. The theory's orientations align with the study's conclusions. Zonal language monopoly in this study is viewed as language as a problem orientation contributing to linguistic oppression thus negatively impacting the minority linguistic learners' performance. Teachers' use of learners' language to make them understand the concept is seen to be language as a right orientation promoting learners' language rights, aligning with the study's emphasis on linguistic diversity and inclusion. Therefore, in this study, language as a resource orientation values linguistic diversity, supporting the study's findings on the benefits of multilingualism.

### 6.1 Conclusion

The implication of the findings is that learner performance is negatively affected through the dominance of zonal language monopoly causing low performance in grade one literacy classes. The imposition of a zonal language (Nyanja) by teachers perpetuates linguistic oppression on learners who speak minority languages, including Goba, putting those learners out of place and classroom in their own communities where they should have been using their community language for educational purposes. Nyanja' dominance on instruction, learning materials, teaching and assessment, cause low literacy levels as the learners cannot comprehend the language used in the learning process. The language monopoly was promoted by teachers' linguistic choice supported by language policy as the monolingual policy being used is rather rigid and not dynamic in any way. The language monopoly excluded learners who spoke other languages apart from Nyanja, limiting their participation and academic achievements which was a new academic oppression and linguistic slavery to say. Therefore, Zonal Language and the current curriculum is a form of linguistic academic oppression in the Zambian primary schools where the LOI is not familiar. Henceforth, there is need for educators to promote linguistic inclusivity in schools.

### 6.2 Recommendation

Based on the research findings and conclusion of the study, it is recommended that;

- i. The Ministry of Education should have a systematic support and policy reforms to address the language barrier and promote linguistic diversity in education to ensure that there is equal access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their linguistic background.
- ii. Universities and colleges of education should ensure that teachers' efforts are enhanced through training them in multilingualism, accesses to bilingual materials and by encouraging flexible language policy so that teacher are empowered to effectively support linguistically diverse learners leading to improved academic outcomes and a more inclusive education system.
- iii. Schools should recognize and value linguistic diversity with communities to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all learners and to have a stronger relationship between schools and diverse communities.

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