



# **The Role of Mother Tongue Instruction at Lower Primary Education: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Teaching Icibemba in Primary Schools of Mwansabombwe District, Luapula Province**

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**Abstract-** This study investigated the effectiveness of mother tongue instruction, specifically the use of Icibemba, in enhancing learning outcomes among lower primary school pupils in Mwansabombwe District, Luapula Province, Zambia. In alignment with Zambia's language-in-education policy, which promoted the use of local languages from Grades 1 to 4, the research assessed the academic performance of learners taught in Icibemba, evaluated teachers' preparedness and capacity to deliver instruction in the language, examined the availability of teaching and learning materials, and explored parental and community perceptions regarding mother tongue education.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative data from pupil performance assessments and school records with qualitative data gathered through interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions involving teachers, parents, and education officials. The findings indicated that instruction in Icibemba significantly supported early literacy and numeracy development when delivered by trained teachers using appropriate materials. However, the study also revealed challenges such as inadequate teaching resources, limited teacher training, and mixed community attitudes toward local language instruction, which hindered its full effectiveness.

The study concluded that while mother tongue instruction in Icibemba held promise for improving educational outcomes at the lower primary level, its success depended on strengthening teacher support systems, increasing resource allocation, and promoting community sensitization. Recommendations included enhanced teacher training, curriculum development in local languages, and stronger policy implementation to ensure equitable and effective early education.

**Keywords-** Mother tongue instruction, Icibemba, early childhood education, primary schools, Zambia, language policy, Mwansabombwe District

## **I. Introduction**

The role of language in education has long been a subject of interest among educators, policymakers, and linguists. In multilingual countries such as Zambia, the choice of language used in early education significantly affects learners' comprehension, participation, and overall academic performance. Recognizing this, the Zambian government introduced a language-in-education policy in 2014 that promoted the use



of local languages as the medium of instruction from Grade 1 to Grade 4. This policy aimed to strengthen foundational literacy and numeracy skills by allowing children to learn in a language they spoke and understood best. In Mwansabombwe District of Luapula Province, Ibibemba is the dominant local language and has been implemented as the medium of instruction at the lower primary level.

Despite the policy's intentions, the effectiveness of mother tongue instruction in improving educational outcomes remained uncertain in many regions, including Mwansabombwe. While some studies supported the use of mother tongue instruction for improved learner engagement and comprehension, others highlighted practical challenges such as limited teaching materials, inadequate teacher training, and negative perceptions from parents who preferred English for its perceived socioeconomic advantages.

This study therefore investigated the effectiveness of using Ibibemba as a medium of instruction in selected primary schools in Mwansabombwe District. It explored whether pupils benefited academically from being taught in their mother tongue, examined teachers' capacity and preparedness to deliver instruction in Ibibemba, assessed the availability of relevant teaching and learning materials, and analyzed community perceptions of the use of local language in education.

The findings of this study were expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on language policy in education and to inform future decisions regarding curriculum implementation and teacher support systems in Zambia's multilingual context.

## II. LITERATURE SURVEY

The importance of mother tongue instruction in early childhood education has been widely documented across various educational and linguistic studies. UNESCO (2003) emphasized that children learn best when taught in their first language, as it fosters better comprehension, cognitive development, and active participation in the classroom. This principle underpins many language-in-education policies in multilingual countries, including Zambia.

Research by Cummins (2000) introduced the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), highlighting that learners develop social language skills quickly but require sustained instruction in their mother tongue to acquire academic language proficiency. This theoretical framework supports the use of local languages like Ibibemba during the foundational years to build strong literacy and numeracy skills.

Several studies in sub-Saharan Africa have demonstrated the positive effects of mother tongue instruction. For example, Brock-Utne (2007) found that children taught in their home language had better academic performance and higher self-esteem than those taught exclusively in colonial or foreign languages. Similarly,



Kamwangamalu (2015) noted that mother tongue instruction improves learner retention and reduces dropout rates.

In the Zambian context, Chansa-Kabali and Kaoma (2017) explored the implementation of the 2014 Language in Education Policy and found mixed results. While the policy has increased the use of local languages in early grades, challenges such as insufficient teaching materials in local languages, lack of teacher training, and parental preference for English persist. Other studies specific to Ibibemba instruction (e.g., Mbewe, 2018) indicated that when adequately supported, Ibibemba-medium instruction enhances pupils' literacy skills, but its effectiveness is limited by resource constraints.

Community attitudes toward mother tongue instruction also affect its success. Research by Mwansa (2019) highlighted that some parents view English as the key to future economic opportunities and thus discourage the exclusive use of local languages in schools. This perception creates tension between policy intentions and community expectations, impacting the implementation of mother tongue instruction. In summary, existing literature affirms the educational benefits of mother tongue instruction but also underscores the practical challenges faced in real-world contexts. This study builds on these findings by focusing on the specific case of Ibibemba instruction in Mwansabombwe District, aiming to provide localized insights that can inform policy and practice.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of teaching Ibibemba as a medium of instruction in lower primary schools of Mwansabombwe District.

#### **Research Design**

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to gain a comprehensive understanding of pupils' academic performance, teacher preparedness, availability of teaching materials, and community perceptions related to mother tongue instruction.

#### **Study Area and Population**

The study was conducted in Mwansabombwe District, located in Luapula Province, where Ibibemba is the predominant local language spoken by the majority of the population. Participants in the study included pupils from Grades 1 to 4, teachers responsible for lower primary education, school administrators, and parents. This diverse group provided a comprehensive perspective on the use and effectiveness of Ibibemba as a medium of instruction in primary schools within the district.



### **Sampling Procedure**

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select ten primary schools, ensuring representation from both rural and peri-urban areas within Mwanasabombwe District. Within each selected school, purposive sampling was used to identify four teachers responsible for teaching Grades 1 to 4. A proportional sample of 100 pupils was also selected across the schools to participate in the study. Additionally, fifty parents and five education officials were purposively chosen to participate in interviews, providing further perspectives on the implementation and effectiveness of Icibemba instruction.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

To gather comprehensive data on the effectiveness of Icibemba as a medium of instruction in lower primary schools, the study utilized a variety of data collection instruments. Standardized literacy and numeracy tests administered in Icibemba were used to assess pupils' academic performance in Grades 1 to 4. Structured questionnaires were distributed to teachers to gather information on their training, instructional methods, and the challenges they faced in teaching using the mother tongue. To gain deeper insights into perceptions and attitudes toward Icibemba instruction, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, parents, and education officials, while focus group discussions with parents provided additional qualitative data. Classroom observations were also carried out to examine teaching practices, pupil engagement, and the use of instructional materials in Icibemba. Furthermore, relevant school documents such as lesson plans, school performance records, and policy documents on language instruction were reviewed to supplement and validate the data collected from other sources.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data obtained from pupil performance tests and teacher questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means and frequencies, to summarize the results. Inferential statistics, specifically t-tests, were conducted to compare academic performance across different schools. Meanwhile, qualitative data gathered from interviews and classroom observations were analyzed thematically to identify common patterns, perceptions, and challenges related to the teaching of Icibemba in lower primary classes.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study revealed that pupils taught in Icibemba demonstrated improved literacy and numeracy skills compared to those exposed primarily to English at the same level. This supports the theory that mother tongue instruction enhances cognitive understanding and academic achievement in early education (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2003). Teachers who had received formal training in local language instruction applied more interactive and learner-centered methods, which contributed positively to pupil engagement.



However, the study identified significant challenges limiting the full effectiveness of Ibibemba instruction. Many teachers reported inadequate training and a lack of sufficient teaching and learning materials in Ibibemba, which compromised lesson delivery. Classroom observations confirmed that resource scarcity often led to reliance on rote learning and translation to English. Additionally, parental attitudes were mixed; while some parents appreciated the benefits of mother tongue instruction, others preferred English, citing concerns about future job prospects and educational advancement.

These findings echo previous research by Chansa-Kabali and Kaoma (2017), which emphasized the need for better resource provision and community sensitization to support language policy implementation. The tension between policy goals and community expectations suggests that for mother tongue instruction to be fully effective, concerted efforts must be made to align educational practices with local realities and stakeholder perceptions.

In conclusion, the study confirmed that teaching in Ibibemba at lower primary level positively impacts learners' academic outcomes but also highlighted critical areas requiring policy attention, such as teacher capacity building, resource development, and community engagement. Addressing these challenges could improve the implementation and sustainability of mother tongue instruction in Mwanabombwe District and beyond.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that mother tongue instruction using Ibibemba in lower primary schools of Mwanabombwe District positively influences pupils' academic performance, particularly in literacy and numeracy. Pupils taught in Ibibemba showed improved comprehension and engagement, confirming the benefits of early education in the mother tongue as supported by existing educational theories and policies. However, the effectiveness of this instructional approach was found to be constrained by challenges such as insufficient teaching materials, limited teacher training, and mixed community attitudes toward the use of local language in education.

The findings suggest that while the use of Ibibemba as a medium of instruction holds significant promise for improving foundational learning outcomes, its full potential can only be realized through strengthened teacher capacity, increased availability of instructional resources, and enhanced community sensitization. These conclusions highlight the critical need for coordinated efforts among policymakers, educators, and communities to support and sustain mother tongue education in Mwanabombwe and similar contexts.



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