

Teaching and contextualizing the Primary Reading Program (PRP) in Zambian schools

This paper springs from my ongoing doctoral study on children's linguistic premises for formal schooling in rural Zambia. During 2008 and 09, I spent nine months of fieldwork in a rural community in Southern Zambia, investigating the language socialisation of and among children in various learning contexts like homes, churches, fields and classrooms. As part of this study, I also looked at the current national reading program, which has been implemented in all primary public schools across Zambia, namely the Primary Reading Program. This program is targeted towards employing either of the seven regional Zambian languages alongside with English in the teaching of reading and writing in Grades 1-7, and it is my observations of the tangible implementation of this program which I will talk about here.

LANGUAGE IN ZAMBIAN EDUCATION

As in most other African countries today, Zambia hosts a broad variety of more or less related languages, with English figuring as the sole national language, and seven regional languages functioning as lingua francae in urban areas, in lower levels of schooling, and in semiformal public spheres: Nyanja/Chewa, Bemba, Tonga, Lozi, Lunda, Luvale, and Kaonde. Apart from urban areas, the majority of Zambian children grow up in communities dominated by one or two Zambian languages, and with no or relatively little exposure to English outside of school. A number of children grow up in bi- or multilingual households and neighbourhoods, especially in more urban areas, and in these cases, a regional language is much more likely to be used as lingua franca than English, except perhaps in households where parents have high levels of formal education. In spite of this low exposure to English among the large majority of Zambian children, English has figured as the only official medium of instruction from Grade 1 onwards in all public schools since independence in 1964, based on arguments that it would be too complicated, costly and politically dangerous to implement local languages in schools – and that using English as the medium of instruction would benefit all children, preparing them for globalisation and modernity within and beyond Zambia (Kashoki 1990). However, with continuously low reading results appearing among learners across the country, and with teachers and educational researchers reporting the pivotal problem for young learners to be their incomprehension of the medium of instruction, things began to change in the late 1990s. Following a radical educational reform in 1996, the British and South African-inspired Primary Reading Program was adapted to the Zambian context by a group of linguistic-educational researchers, and during the early 2000s, this program was implemented in about 5000 schools across the country.

THE PRIMARY READING PROGRAM

The main target of the Primary Reading Program (PRP) has been to integrate the seven regional Zambian languages or regiolects systematically into the teaching of reading and writing in early grades, together

with the continuous official language of instruction, English. As the name says, this is a *literacy* program, not an entire replacement of existing curricula and teaching methods, and just as before the implementation of the PRP, subjects like ‘English’ and ‘Zambian languages’ figure as separate subjects on national time tables (with separate methodologies). The twosided aim of the PRP has been to 1) enhance general reading and writing results through using a familiar medium of instruction in early grades, and 2) preserve English as the dominant medium of instruction and communication across the national school system (Ministry of Education 1996, Sampa 2005). The teachers I observed also used regiolects in other subjects than ‘Language & Literacy’ in Grades 1-7, but this use was not recommended or systematised on behalf of curriculum or national policies. Here is a quick overview of the PRP as implemented on different grade levels:

Grade 1: New Breakthrough to Literacy/NBTL

The new learners are introduced to

- Literacy – reading and writing of letters and simple words in local regiolect (1 hour pr day)
- Oral English – pronunciation of simple words in English, (2 x 30 mins pr week)

Medium of instruction: regiolect, except for a few colloquial phrases in English

Textbook language: regiolect

Teachers may choose between regiolect and English in remaining subjects.

Grade 2: Step Into English/SITE

Learners are introduced to

- Literacy – continued reading and writing in the regiolect + introduction to reading and writing in English (1 hour pr day)
- Oral English – pronunciation, reading and writing of simple English words (30 min pr day)

Medium of instruction: A mix of the regiolect and English, usually with ‘parallel discourses’ – English serving as ‘official medium’ and the regiolect as ‘interpersonal medium’ or translation of English. Students are encouraged to speak in English, but permitted to speak in the regiolect.

Textbook language: regiolect in the teaching of “Zambian Language”, English in all other subjects

Grade 3-7: Read on Course/ROC

Learners are introduced to

- Literacy – continued reading and writing in the regiolect and in English (1 hour pr day in Grades 3-4, 30 mins pr day in Grades 5-7)

Medium of Instr.: code-switching between regiolect and English, increasingly dominated by English.

Texts and storybooks have been compiled by a team of teachers, researchers, consultants, and creative writers, using imagery familiar to most rural learners, like homesteads, maize fields, cattle, and local crafts. According to both teachers and learners, the version of the regiolects used in these books is in line with the everyday linguistic practices of most Zambians, both in rural and urban areas, ensuring the applicability of the PRP into various contextual settings. Although it is still early to conclude anything on the long-term

effects of the PRP, some statistics made right after the program's implementation showed very promising results:

Mean performance in Zambia language, Grade 1

Province	1999	2002
Central	2.2	12.1
Copperrbelt	1.7	19.7
Eastern	1.6	20.9
Luapula	1.7	17.7
Lusaka	2.7	24.1
Northern	3.8	15.4
Northwestern	3.4	14.8
Southern	0.8	7.2
Western	0.4	7.8

National mean performance in Oral English, Grade 2

	1999	2002
All provinces	4.8	24

English Reading and Writing Scores in 2002

- Grade 2 – 575% of 1999 figures
- Grade 3 – 417% of 1999 figures
- Grade 4 – 300% of 1999 figures
- Grade 5 – 165% of 1999 figures

Zambian Languages Reading and Writing Scores in 2002

- Grade 1 – 780% of 1999 figures
- Grade 2 – 613% of 1999 figures
- Grade 3 – 484% of 1999 figures
- Grade 4 – 332% of 1999 figures
- Grade 5 – 218% of 1999 figures

Source: *Follow Up to the 1999 Baseline Study*, (Ministry of Education 2002), cited in Sampa 2005:67

The effects of the PRP have not been measured or evaluated in isolation since 2002, but general national exam results indicate a continuously positive effect, although not as drastic as in the early results above. As an 'early-exit model' (ADEA 2006) with the language of instruction shifting into English already by Grade 2, the PRP is not entirely in line with the recommendations of Thomas & Collier and other language educationalists, which generally recommend the predominant use of a familiar language of instruction and communication until Grade 6 and, preferably, beyond (Thomas & Collier 1997, ADEA 2006). Looking at the early measures of the program above, we see a rather drastic decrease in the improvement of learners' reading results between Grade 2 and 5, and this could indicate a deficiency in an early-exit model like the PRP. In order to look more closely at the implementation of the PRP in actual classrooms, I now present a transcript based on one of the numerous lessons I observed. This one was recorded early in the year among a group of very new learners, most of whom had not gone to preschool of any kind:

Example of Literacy lesson in Grade 1

Transcription settings: non-italics – chiTonga, parenthesis – English translation of chiTonga, *italics* – English.

[2:44]

1. Teacher: Aanzia.. aanzia... nweye basa nweye ba kamuvwila we kamulanga we nweyebo, basa.
2. Kamwanda basa! (Yes yes, you my friends, you answer, my friends!).
3. Learners [chorusing with him]: *How are you?*
4. Teacher: Kamuvwila we, sena ndilinyemedede? (Do I look annoyed?)
5. Learners: Peepe! (No!)
6. Teacher: Ndaanda bana bakkomene mebo, tee kayi? (I want happy children, understand?)
7. Learners: Iiiyi! (Yes!)
8. Sena ndili nyemedede? (Do I look annoyed?)
9. Learners: Peepe! (No!)
10. Teacher: Ndinyanda bakkomene, tee kayi? (I want those who are happy, right?)
11. Learners: Iiyi! (Yes!)
12. Teacher: Okeyi, okeyi! Ndalumba! (Okay, okay! Thank you!)
13. Learners: Xxxx.
14. Teacher: Eenzye, ambebo, ndikkomene, ndityeni? (Yes, I'm also happy. I am what?)
15. Learners: Ndilikkomene! (I am happy!)
16. Teacher: Tee kayi? (Right?)
17. Learners: Iiyi! (yes).
[xx, difficult to hear] [3:28]
18. Teacher: Toonse, basa, ndamulumboa muinde kumbele, tee kayi? (I'm asking you to come up in
19. front together now, dear friends, okay?)
20. Learners: Iiyi (yes)
21. Teacher: Tee kayi, basa? (Understand, my friends?)
22. Learners: Iiyi (yes)
23. Teacher: Ino kuti ndikobone upanga coongo. Sweet ndamwiina, mwanvwa? (If I hear you making
24. any noise, I will not give you sweets, okay?)
25. Learners: Oowoo (Okay). [03:45]
26. Teacher: Batambauli ndabapa switi twazwa awa. Alimwi utilile, utilile nsekomuyanzii? (Those who
27. are not talking, I will give sweets when you go home. But those who cry, I will not give them what?)
28. Learners: Switi! (Sweets!)
29. Teacher: Tee kayi? (Right?)
30. Learners: Iiyi! (Yes!)
31. Teacher: Okuno nkucikolo, katuliiba. Twazya kutyani? (Here in school, let's feel free. We come to
32. do what?)
33. Learners: Kwiiya! (To learn!) [4:03]
34. Teacher: Tee kayi? (Right?)
35. Learners: Iiyi! (Yes!)
36. Teacher: Twakavwide buyo bamba kuti kuli kwiiya, so sunu twanda kutyani? (We just heard people
37. talk about learning, so today we want to do what?)
38. Learners: Kwiiya! (To learn!)
39. Teacher: Nguni oyo? Nguni utaavwide. Ino nwebo njoomukala awo (Who is that one? Who does
40. not understand [what I just said]? Where should you sit?)
41. Learner: Xxxxxx.
42. Teacher: Umwi akkale awa? (Someone to sit here?)
43. Learner: Umwi awai (Someone here).
44. Teacher: Umwi ali? Kamuzya awa, kamuzya, kamuzya, omwe kazya yebo nuamuka, nuamuka,
45. nuamuka (Someone where? Come here, come come, someone come here. You) [in English] *stand*
46. *up, stand up, stand up, stand up. Stand up!*
[upon this, the children all stand up and gather around the teacher at the board] [4:38]

In spite of their relative unfamiliarity with the 'world of school', the children in this extract do not seem to have any trouble answering the questions posed to them by their teacher, either in the local regiolect, chiTonga, or the few instructions in English, like "*How are you*" (3) and "*Stand up!*" (45-46). This does

not tell us much about their general proficiency of English, but according to my observations of these and similar children both in classrooms and family homes, most of them are unable to understand or speak any English besides a few fixed colloquial expressions like “How are you? – fine”, and “Good morning, class – Good morning, teacher!”. The children might not even be entirely aware that this is *English*, but rather experience it as part of a general ‘school way’ or ‘register’ (Agha 2007) of speaking and behaving, in line with wearing uniforms, speaking in unison with other children, and using books, pencils, tables and chairs. With most practices of school being unfamiliar to the large majority of the new students, the teacher’s main job during the first months or year(s) of school is to make children comfortable and able to participate in class – and like the teacher above, he or she might do this by imitating a ‘parent-like’ way of speaking to the children, using humour and his own facial expression to make them happy (4-11), promising them sweets if they behave well in class (23-30), and continuously calling them “basa”, meaning “my dear friends” (1, 2, 18, 21) – a common affectionate term among elder villagers towards children. Such teacher initiatives may seem insignificant, but the fact that children recognise at least some of the things they are met with in class, including the language of instruction and parts of the discourse or verbal register used by teachers, may have major consequences to children’s knowledge acquisition and general sense of identification with the kind of activities happening in class¹.

The *call-response* pattern characterising the lesson above – and in fact, most lessons in schools both within Zambia and many parts of Africa – makes it relatively easy for learners to know *when* and generally also *how* to respond, whether the lesson is conducted predominantly in English or the familiar regiolect. Characteristic for the call-response pattern is the explicit authority and regulatory power of the teacher, constantly setting the course of the class by asking questions and giving orders to the collective group of learners. As part of this call-response pattern, many teacher directives, both in early and later grades, follow a learning system which is known as *guided repetition* (Rogoff 2008), with the teacher introducing a concept or sentence, and then repeating this once or more times, followed by a *wh*-question addressed to the whole class. This also goes for the extract above, with the teacher saying e. g. (in chiTonga), “Yes, I’m also happy. I am what?” and learners responding, “I am happy!” (lines 14-15), and “Here in school, let us feel free to learn. We come to do what?” with learners replying, “To learn!” several times (lines 31--38). Western educationalists and consultants often criticise teaching methods in African schools like call-response and guided repetition for being overly rigid and restrictive on children’s acquisition and participation in class. However, in a social and cultural context, where the institution and practices of school can appear quite alien to many children, the very explicit and easily recognisable form of participation, which these methods offer, might serve as a way of engaging the new students in the enterprise of learning, making them feel competent as members and participants (Moore 2004).

¹ My dissertational work centres mainly on the kind of (language) socialisation and learning activities which children like the ones above take part in *outside* of classrooms, like cooking with their mother in family kitchens, watching and nursing their younger siblings, helping their fathers in the maize fields, or playing with peers on the way home from school. I do not have time to go into details with this part of my research today, but generally I can say that most of the learning and socialisation patterns characterising these other ‘life worlds’ of children’s lives differ quite drastically from the patterns they are met with in school.

Although about two thirds of Zambian children, especially in rural areas, leave school before entering secondary school, primary education in Zambia continues to be targeted towards higher, more abstract levels of formal learning. This implies that children must continue learning new words, concepts and practices across all grade levels, moving towards increasingly more abstract and decontextualised ways of approaching the world – for example, relationships between cause and response, and the use of subordinates and superordinates, synonyms, antonyms, metaphors, etc. According to my interviews with teachers and my observations of English and chiTonga literacy lessons across all grade levels, the children’s acquisition of such abstract concepts, together with the general acquisition of reading and writing, generally seemed more successful in lessons dominated by the regiolect as medium of instruction than English – including, perhaps paradoxically, learners’ acquisition of unfamiliar *English* terms and concepts. This might appear from the following extract from a Grade 7 lesson of ‘English Literacy’ (taken from the same school as the previous lesson), in which the teacher, contrary to curricular instructions, translates almost everything she says in English into chiTonga:

Example of ‘English Literacy’ lesson in Grade 7

Transcription settings: non-italics – chiTonga, parenthesis – English translation of chiTonga, *italics* – English.

[2:00]

1. Teacher: *Can we pack our books? Can you stop whatever you’re doing?* Tulinvwe kwaanguluka,
2. ai? (Let’s feel free, right?)
3. Learners: [all] Okay.
4. Teacher: *XXX parts of speech. We are going to look at a noun. Maybe somebody can tell us what*
5. *a noun is? Noun ncinzi? (What is a noun?) What is a noun? Katusola... Noun ncinzi...? (Let’s try. A*
6. *noun is what..?) What is a noun?... Yes, Minna?... Who can try? Yes, Memory?*
7. Learner: [In very low voice] *Nouns are words that name people, place, things or idea.*
8. Teacher: *Okay. Nouns are words that name people, place, things or idea. Or in simple terms we*
9. *can say, nouns are what? are naming words. Mubufwaafwi inga twaamba kuti ma nouns*
10. *ngaalya mabbala ngotutyani? Ngotubandauka nzi? Zyintu. Ngaalya mazyina aabantu naape izyintu*
11. *mbuli tebbo mbulinzi? Window, masamu zyoonse tuzyiita kuti ninzi? Ma nouns (In short, we can*
12. *say that nouns are those words that we do what with? Name what? Things. They are names of*
13. *people or things like table, window, trees. All these, we call them what? Nouns).*
14. Learners [all, chorusing with her]: *Nouns.*
15. Teacher: *So, nouns are words that names place, people, things or idea. Now, let us look at another*
16. *word: Adjective. Ino adjective ncinzi? (What is an adjective?) What is an adjective? Yes?*
17. Learner: [Low voice] *They are words that qualifies a noun*
[general noise, moving of benches] [4:40]
[...., no speech for a while]
18. Teacher: *Okay, before we go to an adjective, maybe you can give us an example of a noun. Ma*
19. *examples aama nouns ngabuti? Huh? Pest, kotupa example ya noun. Twaamba kuti zibandaukwa.*
20. *(Examples of nouns are what? Pest, give us an example of a noun. We said those that name*
21. *things). Yes?*
22. Learner: *‘Teacher’.*
23. Teacher: *‘Teacher’, ahem.*
24. Learner: *XXX*
25. Teacher: *Ah ah kutali muntu omwe (Ah ah, not the same person [pupil]). Ahem. Others, ‘teacher’?*
26. *Ino tobamwi (What about others?). Yes?*
27. Learner: [In very low voice] *‘Table’.*
28. Teacher: *Huh?*

29. Learner: *'Table'*.
30. Teacher: *'Table'*. *What else, yes?*
31. Learner [in low voice]: *Bottles*.
32. Teacher: *Bottles, yes?*
33. Learner: [Low voice] *Zambia*.
34. Teacher: *Zambia, ahem*.
35. Learner: *Chairs*.
36. Teacher: *Chairs, okay. Now, let us look at adjectives*. [noise, general talk] [6:05]
37. Teacher: *What did we say an adjective is? What is an adjective? Example, anyone? xxxx, yes?*
38. Learner: [very low voice] *A word that qualifies...*
39. Teacher: *Huh?*
40. Learner: [still low voice] *A word that qualifies...*
41. Teacher: *A word that qualifies.. Incomplete. Yes?*
42. Learner: *A word that qualifies a noun*.
43. Teacher: *Okay*.

[6:xx]

In this lesson, we see how the teacher-initiated *call-response* pattern continues to dominate the classroom interaction. Contrary to the Grade 1 lesson before, students now also respond individually, which is characteristic of PRP lesson in higher grades – but the predetermined character of the teacher’s questions, including the use of guided repetition and predetermined questions, is unaltered. As appears, the topic of this lesson is the listing and explanation of grammatical categories in English, like nouns and adjectives. Learners have to define these categories in a predetermined way, which they have been taught during the past semester – nouns as “*words that name people, place, things or idea*” or “*naming words*” (4-15), and adjectives as “*words that qualify a noun*” (36-43). If we look at the teacher’s use of the local regiolect, *chiTonga*, we see how this is predominantly used for two things: 1. for commenting and interacting more personally with students (“*Let’s feel free, right?*” (1-2), “*Let’s try*” (5), “*Ah ah, not the same person*” (25), and “*What about others?*” (26)), and 2. for direct translation following or predicting directives and questions in English (e. g. lines 5-6, 8-13, 18-21 and 25-26). There is no doubt that this use of the local regiolect is useful for both teacher and students in the context above, since a complete lack of *chiTonga* would make it more or less impossible for them to communicate in class. However, at no point in the extract above, nor in the remaining lesson, is the local regiolect used in order to investigate or discuss the topic of the lesson, although this would be assumed to have a major impact on the students’ understanding and acquisition of, in this case, the relatively abstract topic of the definition and function of grammatical categories. Considering the linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds of most of these learners, such an investigation and discussion might include valuable *metalinguistic* comments on a) the function and commonality of e. g. nouns and adjectives in everyday conversation, both inside and outside of class, on b) the similarities and differences between the use of such categories in *chiTonga* and English, and perhaps also on c) the advantage of knowing the differences between grammatical categories, e. g. when composing a text or when making a translation between two languages. However, none of such comments or investigations were made in the numerous lessons I observed. Rather than serving as a way of expanding and enhancing the classroom dialogue between teacher and students, and perhaps among students themselves, it is my general observation among lessons of PRP across all grade levels that the local regiolect is merely as auxiliary language or ‘crutch’ in class, with English continuously figuring as the only

legitimate 'language of knowledge' at school. This leads on to a much wider discussion about the purposes and methods of primary and further education in Zambia and beyond, including discussions of rote learning versus learner-centred methodologies, which there is no time for today.

All in all, the Primary Reading Program has definitely contributed in terms of creating *inviting* and *participatory* learning environments, particularly for young learners in rural areas like the one I observed, through allowing for interpersonal and translatory comments in a familiar language. However, when it comes to creating more *investigatory* environments, especially among higher grades, the PRP has done little more than legitimising the use of code-switching between familiar and official medium of instruction, which has been common in classrooms across Africa for most of the past century. To fully benefit from the potential of employing regiolects and familiar languages in Zambian classrooms, the learners' own linguistic and sociocultural experiences and reflections must be given a more legitimate place in the school context than they are today.

Thank you.

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