

Report from Zambia. Investigating everyday practices in and out of classrooms implementing the Primary Reading Program

INTRODUCTION

This paper springs from my ongoing doctoral study on children's linguistic premises for formal schooling in rural Zambia. In 2008-09, I spent nine months of linguistic-anthropological fieldwork in a village environment in Zambia's Southern Province, recording and processing verbal and non-verbal interactions between children and caretakers, children and teachers, and among children themselves, both in and out of homes and classrooms. I also interviewed a large number of parents, teachers, headmasters, teacher trainers and other educational stakeholders in Zambia on obstacles and concerns around the language-in-education issue in children's early schooling. My aim was to investigate some of the more hidden contextual factors – historical, political, and particularly social and linguistic preconditions – permeating the basic school experience of many Zambian or African children; an experience which is often, also today, characterised as problematic or even as failure (Serpell 1993). However, as the emphasis of this conference is on 'the way forward', I will keep my focus on that today.

The research took place ten years after the early piloting of the renowned Primary Reading Program in Zambia's Northern Province, and three years after the completion of its national implementation in 2005. Although my study was never considered a direct examination of the reading program, it ended up taking an important place, as many of the concerns and considerations around it were directly related to the wider discussion of language-in-education and of learning quality in general. I say this to underline that the following is not a sales pitch for the primary reading program, or an overall evaluation of its long-sighted educational effects. Instead, I wish to illuminate some of the contextual implications, challenges, and everyday practices of speaking, learning, and teaching related to this program, and to give some suggestions for how these might be taken into consideration in future language-in-education designs. Before I do that, I will briefly introduce both the reading program and the setting where I conducted my fieldwork.

THE PRIMARY READING PROGRAM

The Zambian Primary Reading Program is an adaptation of models originally developed in Britain in the 1960s, and later evolved and refined both in Australia and the South African Molteno Project. In Zambia, the program was initially adapted and launched by the Ministry of Education and the British development agency DFID during a 7-year period from the late 1990s (Linehan 2004). It was implemented as a permanent part of the national curriculum in 2005, simultaneous with the political decision to create free primary education for all Zambian children. Inspired by language-in-education research, by positive evaluations of the program in other countries, and a general discontent with the national reading results of Zambian children, the overall ambition was and continues to be to integrate regional Zambian languages

systematically into the teaching of reading and writing, together with the continuous official language of instruction, English (Ministry of Education 1996, Sampa 2005).

Throughout their first seven years of schooling, Zambian children now receive tuition in both ‘English Literacy’, ‘English Language’, ‘A Zambian Language’, and ‘Zambian Language Literacy’, the two latter referring to the seven languages which have been appointed regional lingua francae in each of Zambia’s seven provinces. Apart from bigger cities like Lusaka, Livingston and Kabwe, most of these provinces are generally predominated by one major Zambian language, although various other languages, dialects and linguistic cross-overs from other provinces and neighboring countries obviously exist. In some areas where none of the seven lingua francae are predominant, people have expressed a wish to apply the reading program through other Zambian languages. The ministry has generally been positive towards such requests, although financial and practical restraints have made them difficult to carry out. As part of the implementation, national Grade 7 exams now have a specific local language-component, at least to some extent authorising the official status of Zambian languages in the educational system.

A key element of the primary reading program is the introduction of up to four differentiated learning groups: Based on the teacher’s evaluation of pupils’ individual prerequisites for learning, the pupils are divided into four different levels and situated into four respective learning groups within the classroom. The purpose of this is to help teachers overcome the challenge of children’s often quite diverse preconditions for learning in school, due to the complex make-up of social backgrounds. The program, particularly in Grade 1, employs a teacher kit consisting of sentence makers, word cards, sentence holders for both teacher and learners, a phonic flip chart and conversation posters. Also, a group slate, story books, and exercise books are introduced in each of the seven Zambian languages and with images, situations and descriptions accommodated to the home environments of both rural and urban learners. The three elements or modules of the program are, in brief:

Grade 1: New Breakthrough to Literacy/NBTL

The new learners are introduced to

- reading and writing of letters and simple words in the local/regional language
- pronunciation of simple words in English, like ‘door’, ‘window’ and ‘my name is’

Throughout Grade 1, the medium of instruction and class interaction is the regional language.

Grade 2: Step Into English/SITE

Learners are introduced to

- continued reading and writing in the local/regional language
- pronunciation, reading and writing of simple English words

In Grade 2, the medium of instruction becomes a mix of the local/regional language and English, usually with ‘parallel discourses’ – English serving as ‘official medium’ and the Zambian language as

‘interpersonal medium’ or translation of English. The language of talk among students continues to be predominantly the local/regional language.

Grade 3-7: Read on Course/ROC

Learners are introduced to

- continued reading and writing in the local/regional language
- continued pronunciation, reading and writing of English words and sentences

From Grade 3-7, instruction is increasingly predominated by English, although teachers will continue to speak in ‘parallel discourses’, translating and commenting on English instructions in the local/regional language.

In the evaluations subsequent to the implementation in Zambia, the primary reading program has generally been depicted as a success, causing interest and appraisal among researchers and educational stakeholders throughout the region. Among the listed advantages of the program are (Sampa 2005):

- 1) a thorough implementation of local languages and contextually adapted methodologies into textbooks, lesson plans, teacher’s guides, and other learning aspects
- 2) the placing of literacy and numeracy as central parts of the general curriculum
- 3) the creation of attractive classrooms for children with posters, props, imagery etc
- 4) information and sensitisation of parents, teachers, and other stakeholders on the value of implementing local languages and imagery in formal learning
- 5) an effective teacher training program, serving both student and in-service teachers
- 6) promotion of team work among teachers and ministry of education officials

During the past 4-5 years, some of these aspects have slowly deteriorated, due to both the outphasing of foreign support, the appearance of new initiatives and responsible stakeholders, and the general financial restraints of the Zambian Ministry of Education. According to my observations, the most important downfall is that of teacher training, which was something almost all teachers and headmasters regretted. The program has not been thoroughly integrated into the curriculum of teacher training colleges, so many new teachers arrive at schools without a proper or any training in the methods and framework of the program. Another challenge was the wearing out of books, posters, and charts, which had not been sufficiently compensated by the authorities. Textbooks would often be shared by four or five children, which obviously impeded the performing of exercises and general participation in class. Finally, recent surveys of the overall reading levels of Zambian children do not meet the ambition and enthusiasm surrounding the reading program in its implementary phase. However, it is my impression that this outcome is due to a number of contextual factors surrounding the implementation of the program, rather than a fundamental shortcoming of the program itself. Before I elaborate on some of these factors, I will present the setting where I collected these data.

THE FIELDWORK: MBABALA TOWNSHIP, SURROUNDING VILLAGES, AND BASIC SCHOOL

Mbabala Township is a so-called *periurban township*, situated on the major Namwala Road 45 km north of the larger town Choma. Like many townships in Southern Africa, Mbabala serves as a kind of ‘urban gateway’ to the surrounding 30-40 villages. Apart from the basic school, the township holds a small clinic, a police station, an agricultural office, and various small shops, tailors, bars, and a newly established market place where villagers sell fruit and vegetables to locals and drive-through passengers.

Linguistically, Mbabala is typical for many Zambian townships: There is one predominant Zambian language – in this case chiTonga – spoken by practically all inhabitants and visitors and used for most or all daily purposes, at least in oral communication. English is heard, mainly among professionals posted in the clinics or governmental offices – but even these are more likely to use basic chiTonga or another Zambian lingua franca like Nyanja or Bemba when chatting or meeting with clients at work. Written communication, on the other hand, like official forms, balance sheets, medical prescriptions, and sometimes also letters, is mostly in English – especially among people in their 20s and 30s who have generally completed school without learning to write in chiTonga or another Zambian language.

A significant linguistic element is the widespread access to both national and foreign television, which – perhaps next to the church – is the main source of English language for most townshippers and visiting villagers. When it comes to radio, most villagers and many townshippers prefer the local chiTonga-spoken channels, but Zambian TV continues to have very little broadcasting in languages other than English and more popular Zambian languages like Bemba and Nyanja. Finally, quite a few ‘outsiders’ from neighbouring provinces or countries like Botswana and Angola come to the township through marriage or work, bringing with them a number of languages with some or no similarity to chiTonga. Children living in or visiting the township regularly are thus exposed to a number of different languages. They may not need or be expected to communicate in anything but chiTonga, but they are familiarised with the existence and basic sounds of English and a number of Zambian and perhaps other African languages already before entering school.

Mbabala Basic School hosts around 700 students from Grade 1 to 9, mostly with two tracks on each grade-level. Students come from the township and neighboring villages, and although only few parents frequent the school on a regular basis, there is generally a good and supportive relationship between the school and the surrounding community. Like many other public schools in Zambia and elsewhere, there is a shortage of both personnel and basic educational elements like books, tables, and chairs, together with overfilled classrooms which impede the work environment for both teachers and students. Other challenges, which also recur for primary teachers throughout the country, are low salaries, scarce housing facilities, and difficult access to in-service counselling and training. On top of this, a disproportionately high frequency of

new programs or curriculum elements – usually pushed by ‘generous’ international donors – make up a considerable challenge to teachers, who are expected to implement new programs, curricula and methodologies, sometimes without much relevance to the learning continuity and practices they may have established in classrooms so far.

VIEWPOINTS AND PRACTICES AROUND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PRP

With the primary reading program – contrary to many previous initiatives – teachers and school leaders were generally quite enthusiastic, underlining the contextual and practical adaptability of the methodologies and basic mindset. Teachers emphasised how “this program understands our children”, “there are pictures of animals and maize, not just cars and brick buildings”, and “it’s a good course because we are able to communicate with the children in their mother tongue, you find that they are gaining a lot. Those who are fast learners, by the end of the first term they start to read a few words in the local language”.. Interestingly enough, none of the teachers seemed dissatisfied with the fact that they were to teach in local languages, although the apparent low status of doing so is often used as an argument *against* implementing local language medium of instruction. Many teachers did, however, express the challenges of applying more learner-centred methodologies and of working with learner differentiation in up to four different levels within the same class – but interestingly, these were also some of the aspects which teachers appreciated and emphasised in the program:

“[Learner differentiation] really assists that way because when you combine as a teacher you know your learners very well. You pick on those running at the same pace and give them individual activity. They will do it very well while you have ample time to attend to slow learners who need very much attention in writing and also in reading. While those who are moving very fast you give them challenging work and they really do it, since you have already assessed them and you know that these they can move forward”.

Grade 1 Teacher of New Breakthrough to Literacy/NBTL, Hillside Basic School

In connection to learning differentiation of children, the general and continuous accentuation of the role of *English* is noteworthy. Many teachers and educational stakeholders underline the differentiation and deficiency in young children’s ‘school readiness’ as a crucial problem – especially for children coming from village environments. This problem is persistently associated with those children’s limited exposure to English, rather than to other phenomena which might also be considered school-relevant like exposure to books, narratives, drawings, role plays, work practices, and different kinds of metalinguistic discourse on names, concepts, and conventions, either in chiTonga or another language. During my fieldwork among village families, I observed many of such potentially learning-stimulating phenomena and practices displayed again and again in the interactions of children and adults: Parents instructing children on how to perform certain tasks or explaining them about weather and farming conditions, children telling stories or singing songs to younger siblings and cousins, children experimenting with adult roles and practices during play and work, older family members discussing parables and Bible lessons in the presence of children etc. However, in spite of efforts made by the primary reading program and other initiatives in order to integrate the potential of such out-of-school practices in classrooms, the perception of English language as the sole or most decisive ‘learning device’ in early schooling continues to predominate, both among teachers and

many parents. This might appear from the following observation from a Grade 2 teacher of NBTL, whom I interviewed early in the school year of 2009:

“There are some children within the compound here who have that exposure of the language [English]. They speak a bit of English, but those children from the villages, they know nothing. There is that difference, and it is difficult to take them from there to make them speak English. Very, very difficult, because at home, they don’t hear anyone speaking in English. What we do, especially here at our school, we make two classes of Grade 2s. The first class is the local children, these who stay nearby. The other class is those a bit far from the school, the villages. Even when you teach, you find the other class [of township children] is easier to teach, because they know the language. When you teach the other class [of village children], you find it as if you’re carrying something heavy, because they don’t understand the language. The class today, because last week and this week we’re still combining the two classes, so all the children are together for now. That’s why you heard me speaking in English and a bit of Tonga, so that at least they can get what I’m saying”.

Grade 2 teacher of Step Into English/SITE, Mbabala Basic School

Such a division of children into ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ or ‘town’ and ‘village’ children may be pedagogically useful for both teachers and learners – especially in classrooms of up to 60 children, where creating a stimulating learning space can seem almost impossible. But in a wider perspective, this tendency is problematic in that young children are tagged as ‘slow’ and deficient in the general context of school because of their little exposure to English, and this tag might accompany them as they move their way through the school system. The fact that teachers at Mbabala and other rural or periurban schools feel compelled to divide children into hierarchical groups based on their preschool exposure to English, reveals that the ambition of creating quality education for all Zambian children still meets very tangible challenges. This problem is obviously not a consequence of the primary reading program in itself – on the contrary, the program and its advocates have made a remarkable effort to expose alternative learning paths and the inclusion of various remedies – but my point is that the implementation of programs like the primary reading program may not be sufficient if the aim is to create an inclusive school system for *all* learners.

An important point, related to this, is that the primary reading program does not really alter the predominant status of English medium of instruction in Zambian basic schools. Although learners continue to have ‘A Zambian Language’ on the time table until Grade 7 and the content of this subject is tested in the national Grade 7 exams, the teaching of practically all other subjects, including literacy, numeracy, history and science, is still expected to be taught more or less exclusively in English from Grade 2 onwards. Even though very few teachers are actually able to do this – particularly in rural or periurban schools like Mbabala – it does not change the fact that the wider school system, including teacher training, textbooks and exams on all school levels, continues to be accommodated towards a norm of English-only medium of instruction.

I sat in the classrooms of the teacher above and of many of her colleagues, and in spite of the efforts of these teachers, it was clear how practical, contextual elements of school reality did not always comply with the directives of the reading program. As an overall tendency, there was not enough *time* for classes to complete the tasks outlined in the teacher guides, as children would often have difficulties working their way through texts and exercises within the demarcated lesson. Like other African countries, Zambia gives a

nationally uniform exam at the end of Grade 7, and from the day children enter school, this exam sets a direction and pace for all classroom interaction, governed by nationally distributed teacher's guides. There are several valid arguments for maintaining a uniform national exam and clear guidelines for teachers, and I do not wish to challenge those here. However, the pervasive emphasis on exams in schools can end up having a restrictive and negative impact on the conduct of teachers, who will often have to skip clarifying or elaborative tasks in order to 'get through the syllabus'. The potential and creativity of the contextually attentive, individual teacher is thus often overruled by the sake of national exams, which do not always respond to the framework underlying the programs they are meant to validate.

Secondly, although the reading program is founded on a highly learner-centred methodology, students would rarely speak in class unless directed by the teacher, and student replies would usually have the character of rote repetitions, or what educationalists have called *safe talk*. Interestingly enough, this kind of safe or rote talk would occur both when classes were conducted in English and in the local language, chiTonga, although the latter did seem to have a loosening impact on both teacher and student behaviour. My ethnographic observations of children's verbal and social behaviour outside school, among peers, siblings, parents, or other adults, reveals a stark contrast to the children's classroom behaviour: Although young children would generally display respect and great courtesy towards parents and older members of the community, they would *participate* quite expressively in the everyday interactions in the households – asking questions, expressing comments and feelings, making jokes etc. Parents or older peers might not always be very responsive towards these expressions, but nevertheless there would be a general acceptance and appreciation of children's participation in everyday discourse (Duff & Hornberger 2008). This apparent contrast between the sociolinguistic environment of the school and home settings reveals, for one, that a singular initiative like the primary reading program may not be sufficient to affect deeprooted social traditions like the authoritative role of teachers.

As a third and last point, I will repeat the widespread and continuous perception of *English medium of instruction* as perhaps *the* most crucial element in children's early acquisition of formal learning, both among parents and many teachers. This perception is contrary to what is stated in the Zambian education policy from 1996, to basically all linguistic-educational research, and indeed to the basic methodology and framework of the primary reading program. However, as Zambian national exams and higher educational levels continue to be based almost exclusively on English, this attempt to raise the educational standing of local languages can be seen as rather faint, or at least ambiguous. As most of you are aware, this ambiguity in the language-in-education issue is by no means unique to Zambia, but is a core part of a much wider, mainly political and economic debate, which I will not evoke in this paper. Instead, I will recall the extensive and unequivocal amount of linguistic-educational research recommending at least six years of *additive* mother tongue education (Alidou et al/ADEA 2006, Haddad/Unesco 2008 etc). As a stark contrast to this, the primary reading program in reality only calls for *one* year of full mother tongue education, which is gradually reduced through the subsequent three years.

In spite of these rather critical observations, I will call attention to the *Zambian Primary Reading Program* as a noteworthy and very well-founded educational initiative in a contemporary African setting. Most of the issues mentioned above spring from practices and perceptions among the people involved in the African enterprise of schooling – students, parents, teachers, school leaders, and even political and financial stakeholders, who should have access to more qualified and up-to-date insights. Initiatives like the primary reading program have come far in challenging such perception and creating inclusive learning environments with room for children of diverse backgrounds – both by adapting the medium of instruction, by implementing learner-centered methodologies, and by ‘localising’ parts of curriculum content. What is really needed is for remaining parts of African educational systems to evolve towards a consistent and contextually sensitive integration of local languages and practices. To leave you on a positive and forward-looking note, I will give a few suggestions on things to consider in this enterprise, based my own ethnographic experiences and a broad spectrum of recent linguistic and educational research (e. g. Alidou et al 2006, Barnard & Torres-Guzman, Djité 2008, Moore 2008, Rassool 2007, Ricento 2007, Schieffelin & Ochs 1986, Serpell 1993, Silue 2000):

- **pay careful consideration to the pre-school learning environments and experiences of children**, including those coming from remote rural areas. Through their interactions with adults and older siblings in work, play, and everyday family life, children require a large amount of linguistic and practical knowledge and skills which are far too often overlooked by school programs, including some mother tongue programs claiming to draw on ‘local practice’.
- **enhance and implement teachers’ familiarity with local sociolinguistic practices and norms, both in curricula and teacher education.** Moll & Gonzalez’ extensive studies of local ‘funds of knowledge’ in rural Central America (2005) shows how teachers can learn to identify the economic and social relationships that exist in their students’ communities, and incorporate this knowledge as a literacy resource in the classroom. This obviously also goes for local linguistic and literacy practices.
- **emphasise learner-centred methodologies in teacher education.** This is already happening in teacher training colleges throughout Southern Africa, but greater efforts must be made to disseminate and enhance the benefits of child-centred learning, both among teachers and parents. A simultaneous effort must be made to secure the general esteem of teachers in local communities, to keep the pupil-per-class ratio relatively low, and to maintain a continuous counselling and support for teachers.
- **work towards an ambitious, precise and ‘contextually accommodated’ language-in-education policy**, in close collaboration between sociolinguists, educationalists, practitioners, local leaders, and

political stakeholders. This is obviously an extensive and costly challenge to most African countries, but leaving it to neglect will end up costing a much higher price.

- **extend and adjust this policy into all educational levels, subjects, and exams**, including teacher training and employment, and create a coherent transition between primary, secondary and tertiary school levels.

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