



Bridging the Language Divide: Teacher and Learner Responses to English-Medium Instruction in Zambian Grade 4 Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

Zambia's shift to English-medium instruction from the early primary grades raises urgent questions about how teachers and learners navigate learning when English proficiency varies widely. This article examines teacher and learner responses to English-medium instruction in Grade 4 across four public primary schools in Lusaka and Central Province. Using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the study treats language, peers, teachers, visual resources and familiar-language practices as mediational tools for accessing curriculum content. A qualitative ethnographic multiple-case study combined classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with Grade 4 teachers, head teachers and curriculum-level participants, learner focus-group discussions, and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed a double instructional demand: learners had to acquire new subject content while developing the English needed to access, discuss and demonstrate that content. Teachers responded with phonics remediation, planned and ad hoc code-switching, translation, visual and contextual mediation, peer grouping, additional explanation and locally produced resources. Learners valued English for examinations and progression but showed uneven comprehension, confidence and participation. They also actively constructed support systems through multilingual questioning and peer mediation. The findings suggest that the language divide is bridged most effectively through temporary, purposeful scaffolding linked to explicit English development rather than through abrupt monolingualism or indefinite dependence on translation. The study recommends structured bilingual scaffolding in teacher training, transition-specific professional development, a minimum instructional resource package, and formative assessment practices that distinguish conceptual understanding from English expression.

Keywords: English-Medium Instruction, Code-Switching, Sociocultural Theory, Scaffolding, Multilingual Education Zambia.

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Introduction

The language of instruction does more than transmit curriculum content. It shapes access to explanation, participation, assessment and how learners are positioned socially in the classroom. In multilingual education systems, these functions matter most when the official medium differs from languages used at home and in communities. Zambia offers an important setting because English carries strong

institutional, examination and mobility value, while Zambian languages have played changing roles in foundational literacy and early primary education.

The 2013 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework adopted a sequential model. Familiar Zambian languages served as media of instruction in Grades 1 to 4. English was introduced as a subject, and English became the medium from Grade 5. The rationale was that learners would build foundational

literacy in a language they understood and later transfer those literacy resources to English. The 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework changed this by specifying English as the medium of instruction from the start of primary schooling, except when a Zambian language is taught as a subject (Curriculum Development Centre [CDC], 2023).

The policy change did not produce an immediate or uniform shift in classroom practice. Different curriculum streams coexisted during a transitional implementation period. At Katoba, for example, the 2023 curriculum was being implemented from Early Childhood Education through Grade 4 while Grade 3 continued under the previous syllabus. The Grade 4 cohort in this study thus occupied a distinctive policy moment. Formal expectations increasingly favoured continuous English-medium instruction, yet many learners and teachers remained shaped by earlier familiar-language practices.

English also holds a political and social position beyond its classroom function. For many families, it is linked to examinations, higher education, employment and social mobility. Some community evidence in the study associated English with elite status and viewed mother-language instruction as potentially disadvantageous. This helps explain why support for English-medium education can coexist with substantial pedagogical difficulty. The policy debate is therefore not simply English versus Zambian languages. It concerns how to expand access to English without making English proficiency an immediate gatekeeper to curriculum knowledge.

Existing Zambian research has established the importance of language familiarity for literacy development. It has also identified challenges in the transition to English, including teacher preparation and materials (Tambulukani & Bus, 2012; Machinery & Pali, 2023; Kula & Mwansa, 2022). Recent research shows that multilingual Zambian classrooms require strategies different from those designed for monolingual learners (Mkandawire et al., 2024). This study's distinctive contribution lies in three areas. First, it examines Grade 4 during a policy transition where formal policy and accumulated classroom practice were not fully aligned. Second, it brings teacher and learner accounts into direct analytical conversation rather than treating them separately. Third, it uses classroom, interview, learner focus-group and documentary evidence to show how teachers and learners actively construct bridges between familiar-language knowledge and English-medium expectations.

This paired analysis matters because teachers and learners are not passive recipients of policy. Teachers make moment-to-moment decisions about explanation, language choice, pacing, grouping, visual support and remediation. Learners respond by speaking, remaining silent, asking questions, shifting language, seeking peer assistance, interpreting visual cues and experimenting with English. The article therefore examines English-medium instruction as a socially mediated

process rather than a simple change in the language spoken by the teacher.

The study answered the following research questions:

1. What pedagogical challenges and adaptations characterise teachers' responses to English-medium instruction in Grade 4?
2. How do Grade 4 learners experience and respond to English as the principal classroom language?
3. How do teacher and learner responses function as sociocultural forms of mediation and scaffolding during the transition towards English-medium learning?

Literature Review

The transition from familiar-language instruction to English-medium instruction in postcolonial contexts has attracted sustained scholarly attention. This review examines four interconnected areas: the role of language familiarity in literacy development, the challenges of transitioning to English-medium instruction, pedagogical responses in multilingual classrooms, and the gap this study addresses.

Language Familiarity and Literacy Development

A substantial body of research establishes that learners acquire foundational literacy more effectively in a language they understand. Tambulukani and Bus (2012) demonstrated that linguistic diversity contributes significantly to reading problems in Zambian schools, arguing that learners who begin literacy instruction in a familiar language develop stronger decoding and comprehension skills than those who start in an unfamiliar language. Their work challenged assumptions that early exposure to English accelerates academic achievement.

Kula and Mwansa (2022) compared reading and comprehension competence in Bemba across two contrasting settings in Northern Zambia. Their findings confirmed that learners instructed in a familiar language achieved higher comprehension levels than those instructed in English, even when the English-instructed group received more instructional time. This evidence supports Cummins' (2000) interdependence principle, which posits that cognitive academic language proficiency transfers across languages when learners have sufficient foundational literacy in their first language.

The policy logic of Zambia's 2013 curriculum framework aligned with this research. Familiar Zambian languages were to serve as media of instruction in Grades 1 to 4, with English introduced as a subject before becoming the medium in Grade 5. The expectation was that learners would build strong foundational literacy in a familiar language and then transfer those resources to English. However, the 2023 framework disrupted this sequential model by specifying English as the medium from the start of primary schooling (CDC, 2023).

Challenges in Transitioning to English-Medium Instruction

Research across sub-Saharan Africa has documented persistent challenges in transitioning from familiar-language to English-medium instruction. Machinyise and Pali (2023) examined the transition from Zambian language literacy to English literacy in Grade 3 in Livingstone District. They found that teachers were inadequately prepared to manage the transition, lacking both materials and pedagogical strategies for supporting learners through the linguistic shift.

Sibomana (2022) investigated Rwandan teachers' perspectives on transitioning from local language to English as a medium of instruction. Teachers reported significant difficulties in explaining complex concepts in English, managing mixed-proficiency classrooms, and maintaining learner engagement when comprehension broke down. These findings resonate with broader concerns about policy implementation in contexts where English proficiency among teachers and learners varies widely.

Mkandawire et al. (2024) examined instructional strategies used by teachers in multilingual Zambian classrooms to help non-speakers of the language of instruction learn initial reading skills. Their research highlighted the need for strategies specifically designed for multilingual contexts rather than those developed for monolingual learners. They identified code-switching, visual mediation and peer support as common teacher responses, though these were often ad hoc rather than systematically planned.

Pedagogical Responses in Multilingual Classrooms

The literature identifies several pedagogical responses to the challenges of English-medium instruction in multilingual contexts. Code-switching and translation are among the most frequently documented strategies. Makalela (2015) argued for translanguaging as a pedagogical approach that leverages learners' full linguistic repertoires rather than treating languages as separate systems. His research in South African classrooms demonstrated that strategic use of multiple languages supported both comprehension and English development.

However, the literature distinguishes between productive and unproductive forms of code-switching. Cummins (2000) cautioned that translation becomes counterproductive when it replaces rather than scaffolds English development. The key distinction lies in whether familiar-language use serves as a temporary bridge to English or as a permanent alternative to it. This analytical distinction informs the present study's examination of teacher responses.

Visual and contextual mediation represents another documented strategy. When learners understand a concept but lack the English label for it, visual resources and familiar objects can bridge the gap. Mkandawire et al. (2024) found

that Zambian teachers frequently used pictures, diagrams and locally available objects to reduce the linguistic load of English-medium explanations. This approach aligns with multimodal pedagogy, which treats visual, spatial and linguistic modes as complementary resources for meaning-making.

Peer support and collaborative learning also feature prominently in the literature. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provides theoretical grounding for understanding how more capable peers can extend another learner's performance. However, the literature also cautions that peer support requires teacher guidance to avoid reproducing misunderstandings.

The Gap This Study Addresses

Despite this substantial body of research, three gaps remain. First, few studies examine Grade 4 during a policy transition where formal policy and accumulated classroom practice are not fully aligned. The Zambian context in 2023-2024, with different curriculum streams coexisting, offers a distinctive opportunity to examine how teachers and learners navigate contradictory expectations.

Second, existing research tends to treat teacher and learner responses separately. Studies of teacher pedagogy rarely incorporate learner perspectives systematically, while studies of learner experience often neglect the pedagogical decisions that shape those experiences. This study brings teacher and learner accounts into direct analytical conversation.

Third, much research on language transition focuses on literacy instruction. Less attention has been paid to how transition difficulties affect epistemic access across the curriculum, including subjects with technical vocabulary such as Science. This study examines Grade 4 Literacy and Numeracy lessons while remaining attentive to cross-curricular implications.

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) provides the main theoretical underpinning because the core findings concern mediation, scaffolding, interaction and the use of cultural and linguistic tools. The theory proposes that learning develops through socially organised activity before becoming independently available to the learner. Cognitive development is therefore inseparable from interaction with more knowledgeable others and from the symbolic and material tools through which meaning is constructed.

Three concepts are especially useful. The first is mediation. In the Grade 4 classrooms examined here, meaning was mediated not only through English but also through familiar Zambian languages, peers, pictures, diagrams, real objects, phonics materials and teacher explanations. These resources reduced the distance between what learners already knew and what the curriculum required them to understand in English.

The second concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the difference between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish with appropriate support. Peer grouping, teacher translation, additional explanation and remedial phonics can therefore be interpreted as forms of support enabling participation beyond learners' unaided English competence.

The third concept is scaffolding. Here it is used as an instructional extension of sociocultural theory. Scaffolding is temporary support enabling learners to perform a task, progressively withdrawn as competence increases. This distinction is particularly important for analysing code-switching. A familiar-language explanation functions as productive scaffolding when it helps the learner establish meaning and then reconnects that meaning to English vocabulary, sentence construction or oral participation. By contrast, translation that becomes the permanent endpoint of instruction may solve an immediate communication problem without expanding independent English competence.

Sociocultural theory was selected as the primary framework rather than treating linguistic interdependence and policy enactment as co-equal theories. This choice creates a clearer analytical spine because the research questions principally concern how teachers and learners respond, interact and make meaning in classrooms. Cummins' (2000) interdependence principle is retained as a complementary linguistic proposition where cross-language transfer is directly relevant. Policy-enactment scholarship is used selectively to interpret institutional conditions. The central analytical categories used throughout the findings are therefore mediation, scaffolded participation, the ZPD, cultural tools and gradual movement towards independent performance.

Methodology

Research Design and Setting

The study employed a qualitative ethnographic multiple-case study design. This design was appropriate because the purpose was to examine how language policy was experienced, negotiated and reconstructed in naturally occurring classroom settings rather than to estimate population parameters. Ethnographic approaches are especially useful in language-policy research because they illuminate the relationship between formal policy and situated linguistic practice (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Hornberger & Johnson, 2007a, 2007b). The multiple-case structure enabled comparison across schools while retaining contextual depth (Yin, 2018).

Four public primary schools in Lusaka and Central Provinces constituted the cases. The schools were purposively selected based on curriculum implementation, geographical variation, multilingual language ecology and administrative willingness to support sustained classroom engagement. Two schools were drawn from Lusaka Province and two from Central

Province. Urban and peri-urban variation was built into the sampling logic. Participants also described home language use in rural settings, but the study did not collect a complete, consistently structured school-by-school dataset for class size, dominant home language and prior language-of-instruction history. These details are therefore not reconstructed here because doing so would require unsupported inference.

Participants and Recruitment

Eight Grade 4 teachers, four head teachers, three curriculum-level participants, and four learner focus groups participated in the study. Each focus group contained approximately six to eight learners. Curriculum-level participants were officials or actors concerned with curriculum and policy implementation. These included perspectives identified in the study as CDC/CBC participants.

All Grade 4 teachers in the selected schools were invited to participate. Learners were purposively selected for focus groups to include a range of academic abilities. Parental or guardian consent and learner assent were obtained. Focus groups were organised in familiar school settings and were gender-segregated to support comfort and openness. This design decision is reported as part of the recruitment procedure. The available evidence does not support reliable claims about gender differences in language choice or learner agency. The analysis therefore avoids attributing language-use patterns to gender where the data do not permit such comparison.

Data Collection

Non-participant classroom observations focused primarily on Grade 4 Literacy and Numeracy lessons over an extended period. The research design indicated approximately three to four weeks per school. Observation schedules attended to language choice, code-switching, teacher explanations, learner participation and instructional scaffolding. Semi-structured interviews with teachers, head teachers and curriculum-level participants explored policy understanding, pedagogical challenges, training and perceived learner responses.

Four learner focus-group discussions explored learners' academic, emotional and social experiences of English-medium instruction using age-appropriate prompts. Documentary analysis included curriculum documents, lesson-related materials and learner exercise books. The use of interviews, focus groups, observations and documents enabled methodological triangulation. It made it possible to compare what participants said with classroom and documentary evidence.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) sequence of familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, definition and interpretive synthesis. NVivo was used to organise and code the

qualitative data. The initial analysis generated themes inductively around pedagogical challenges, learner experience, coping strategies and institutional conditions.

For this article, analysis was both inductive and theoretically sensitised. The original themes and participant accounts were retained. The second-stage interpretation used sociocultural concepts deductively to examine how particular responses operated as mediation, scaffolding, peer-supported participation or cultural tools. This approach avoided forcing all data into theory. It also ensured that the theoretical framework was used systematically rather than being added only after the findings had been described.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

The study specified informed consent for adult participants, parental or guardian consent and child assent for learners, anonymisation of identifiers, confidential data storage and procedures intended to minimise disruption and distress. Ethical approval was sought from the Kwame Nkrumah University Research Ethics Committee before data collection.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across interviews, learner focus groups, observation and documentary evidence. Sustained engagement with classroom contexts, role-labelled participant accounts and reflexive attention to researcher and social-desirability effects further strengthened the study. The source report did not document formal inter-coder reliability or member checking. These procedures are therefore not claimed in this article.

Results and Discussion

Participant quotations are reproduced verbatim to preserve participants' original wording, speech patterns and multilingual expressions. Grammatical irregularities within quotations are therefore retained. In each subsection, the analytical explanation precedes the verbatim evidence and is followed by theoretical interpretation.

The Double Instructional Demand: Learning English and Learning through English

The strongest teacher pattern was a mismatch between the English proficiency assumed by Grade 4 instruction and the English resources available to many learners. Teachers described learners who were academically located in Grade 4 but who required foundational support in English sounds, phonics, vocabulary and basic reading. This created a double instructional demand. Learners were expected to develop the language of instruction while simultaneously using that language to learn increasingly complex curriculum content.

Head Teacher 1: "So, these pupils are in Grade 4, but in terms of English, they are just at the foundational stage. So, they are almost like Grade 1 in terms of English language. So, it simply means that we have to start from the foundation."

Head Teacher 1: "The foundation, dealing with sounds, then we go back to the Jolly Phonics, which is taught to the Grade 1... So, we are forced to go back to Grade 1 work so that the learners have a foundation of English."

From a sociocultural perspective, this is a problem of developmental distance. The Grade 4 curriculum presupposes a level of linguistic independence that some learners have not yet reached. Teachers therefore attempt to construct a temporary ZPD through remedial phonics, slower pacing and additional explanation. These forms of support enable learners to participate at a level that would be difficult through unaided English. The tension is that time used to rebuild English foundations reduces time available for grade-level content. The language transition directly affects curriculum coverage.

This finding resonates with Machinyise and Pali's (2023) observation that teachers in Livingstone District were inadequately prepared to manage the transition from Zambian language literacy to English literacy. Their research similarly found that teachers resorted to remedial strategies not anticipated by curriculum planners. The present study extends this finding by showing that the double instructional demand affects not only literacy lessons but also subjects with technical vocabulary.

The issue becomes more acute in subjects that introduce technical vocabulary. Teachers referred to scientific concepts such as the circulatory and respiratory systems as difficult because learners had to grasp both the concept and its unfamiliar English terminology. English was therefore simultaneously the object of learning and the tool through which another object was to be learned. This extends earlier Zambian work by showing that transition difficulties are not confined to literacy lessons. They can restrict epistemic access across the curriculum (Tambulukani & Bus, 2012; Machinyise & Pali, 2023).

From Ad Hoc Translation to Structured Bilingual Scaffolding

Translation and code-switching were the most consistent teacher responses to limited learner comprehension. The evidence indicates that familiar-language use served at least two different functions. In some instances, teachers translated reactively because an English-only explanation had failed. In others, the teacher deliberately allowed a learner to express an idea in a familiar language and then supplied the corresponding English formulation. The second pattern more closely approximates structured bilingual scaffolding because it moves from existing meaning towards the target language rather than ending with translation.

Head Teacher 2: "Teachers will teach in English, but learners will not respond unless they translate now into Bemba. That's when they will respond."

Teacher 2: "When they fail to express themselves in English, I ask them to use the language that they are used to. So, when they use that language, I explain to them that this is maybe what you meant to say."

Using sociocultural theory, structured code-switching can be defined by three criteria. It begins with a comprehension or participation need. It uses a familiar language or other mediational resource to establish meaning. It explicitly returns learners to an English word, phrase, sentence or task. Ad hoc translation, by contrast, tends to be reactive, complete and not followed by a deliberate return to English production. This distinction provides a practical basis for the teacher-development recommendation made later in the article.

The familiar language here functions as a semiotic tool within the learner's ZPD. It enables conceptual participation before full English expression is available. Cummins' (2000) interdependence principle supports this interpretation, suggesting that conceptual knowledge developed in a familiar language provides a foundation for English academic language proficiency. However, the literature also cautions that translation becomes counterproductive when it replaces rather than scaffolds English development (Makalela, 2015). The distinction between structured bilingual scaffolding and ad hoc translation is therefore pedagogically significant.

This finding aligns with Sibomana's (2022) research in Rwanda, where teachers reported similar patterns of code-switching in response to learner comprehension difficulties. Sibomana found that teachers who deliberately planned code-switching as a scaffold achieved better learner outcomes than those who translated reactively. The present study extends this insight by providing criteria for distinguishing productive from unproductive forms of familiar-language use.

Visual and Contextual Mediation Linked Unfamiliar English Labels to Known Concepts

Teachers also used pictures, diagrams, charts, environmental print, familiar objects and locally recognisable terminology to reduce the linguistic load of English-medium explanations. This strategy was particularly effective where learners appeared to know the underlying concept but not the English label. The teacher's task was therefore to build a bridge from existing conceptual knowledge to new English vocabulary.

Teacher 1: "When you just mention it in English, the children will not understand. You mention it in English, you draw that thing, and then you write it in English... Then you get them, you show them, 'Ah, this is a winner. We know what? It is Bope.' Then they will say, 'Oh, this is what we use.' Yes. This mortar, this is Karende at home. So they relate."

The sequence in this example is analytically important. The teacher moves from English term to visual or concrete representation to familiar conceptual label and then back to English. In sociocultural terms, the drawing, object and

familiar-language expression are cultural tools that mediate access to the new linguistic form. The learner is not acquiring an entirely new concept. Rather, an existing concept is being re-signified through English.

This distinction cautions against treating silence or incorrect English as direct evidence of weak subject knowledge. Where learners recognise the concept after visual or familiar-language mediation, the barrier is at least partly linguistic. Multimodal pedagogy is therefore not an optional embellishment in such classrooms. It is a means of widening access to subject knowledge while English vocabulary develops.

Mkandawire et al. (2024) similarly found that Zambian teachers in multilingual classrooms frequently used visual and contextual mediation to support non-speakers of the language of instruction. Their research documented teachers using pictures, diagrams and locally available objects to bridge the gap between learners' conceptual knowledge and English terminology. The present study extends this finding by showing how visual mediation sequences operate as cultural tools within the ZPD.

Resource Constraints Limited the Availability of Mediational Tools

The effectiveness of scaffolding depended on the resources available to teachers. Participants reported shortages of Grade 4 textbooks, teachers' guides, dictionaries, supplementary readers, phonics charts and practical teaching equipment. Soft-copy distribution created further difficulties where schools lacked reliable connectivity, data, printers, paper or funds. Resource scarcity therefore affected not only convenience but the range of mediational tools available to support learners within their ZPD.

Head Teacher 1: "The materials are not adequate in any way. Because currently, what we have is the syllabus. We do not have textbooks, accompanying textbooks, there are no learners' textbooks, there are no teachers' guides, there are no dictionaries, there are no supplementary readers."

Teacher 1: "The things that I'm using are just the charts. Anything, any story, just to communicate, using charts. There is no textbook, no pamphlets."

Teachers responded through local improvisation. They created charts, borrowed lower-grade materials, searched independently for information and used locally available objects. These practices demonstrate professional agency. They also expose an equity problem. If successful mediation depends on a teacher's personal creativity, data access or ability to reproduce resources, formally identical policy can produce markedly different classroom opportunities. The finding supports the view that instructional materials are part of language-policy implementation itself, not a separate logistical issue.

Resource scarcity restricted the material conditions for sociocultural mediation. It made support for English development uneven across schools. This finding resonates with Machinyise and Pali's (2023) observation that inadequate materials compounded the challenges of transitioning to English literacy in Livingstone District. Their research similarly found that teachers lacked textbooks, teachers' guides and supplementary readers, forcing them to rely on improvised resources.

Learners Valued English, but Participation Depended on Mediated Access

Learner responses were heterogeneous. English carried clear institutional value. Learners associated it with examinations and progression, and some expressed enjoyment or excitement. At the same time, comprehension was partial, and participation varied according to topic, vocabulary and available support. Teacher accounts indicated that English-only interaction could reduce the number of learners willing or able to respond, even where those learners participated freely through a familiar language.

Learner FGD 3: "Exam ilesa muchisungu." (The examination comes in English.)

Learner FGD 3: "Ee, fimbi tatumfwa fimbi tulomfwa." (Yes, we do not understand some things, while we understand others.)

Teacher 2: "When you use English, only a few will be able to understand, just a few of those who understand English well. They're the only ones who will participate. The rest will just be cold there."

Teacher 1: "Where your children, when you teach them in local language, they will be very free... But when you bring in their English, you freeze them."

These data illustrate the social dimension of the ZPD. Learning opportunities are not determined only by what learners know internally. They are shaped by whether classroom interaction permits learners to enter the activity. When English makes a learner silent, the learner loses opportunities to formulate ideas, receive feedback, and test understanding. By contrast, mediated access through familiar languages, peers, and teacher support preserves participation while English develops.

The available focus-group evidence does not permit reliable numerical claims about how many learners held each view. It also does not support subgroup comparisons by gender or prior attainment. What it does show is patterned variation. Positive orientation towards English coexisted with uneven comprehension. Stronger English proficiency was associated with more visible participation.

This finding aligns with Sibomana's (2022) research in Rwanda, where teachers reported that English-only instruction reduced learner participation, particularly among

learners with limited English proficiency. Sibomana found that learners who were active participants in familiar-language instruction became silent when instruction shifted to English. The present study extends this finding by showing how mediated access through familiar languages, peers, and visual resources preserves participation while English develops.

Learner Agency: Multilingual Questioning and Peer Mediation

One of the most distinctive findings is that learners actively constructed their own support systems. They did not simply wait for teachers to translate. Learners reported asking one another for clarification, using Chinyanja or Bemba in peer interaction, and moving between languages when English was insufficient. Their language choices appear to have been strategic. Familiar languages were used when immediate comprehension or expression was at stake.

Learner FGD 2: "Yes, we ask each other."

Learner FGD 4: "Timafunsa." (We ask.)

Interviewer: "Muchinyanja?" (In Chinyanja?)

Participants: "Chinyanja."

FGD 4: "Bamakamba muvitundu vibili." (They speak in two languages.)

Teacher 4: "I started putting them in groups so that they should be learning English. I'm picking one who's having an idea in English..."

This evidence supports a stronger interpretation of learner agency than the earlier draft. Learners used multilingual resources not only to cope with difficulty but to restore participation and reconstruct meaning. Asking a peer in a familiar language can be understood as self-initiated scaffolding. The learner identifies a gap, recruits a more capable peer as a mediational resource and then re-enters the learning activity. This is closely aligned with Vygotsky's view that development is mediated through social interaction.

The data do not establish stable patterns by gender, prior literacy level or confidence, so such differences are not inferred. However, the evidence does show why learners shifted language. They did so when they did not understand, could not express themselves easily in English, or needed clarification from peers. This is more than linguistic avoidance. It is purposeful management of the resources available in the classroom.

Peer support nevertheless requires teacher guidance. A more capable peer can extend another learner's performance, but incorrect peer explanations can also reproduce misunderstanding. Structured collaborative learning should therefore include clear tasks, teacher monitoring and a deliberate return from familiar-language discussion to the English terminology required by the curriculum.

Makalela's (2015) research on translanguaging in South African classrooms similarly documented learners' strategic use of multiple languages to support comprehension and participation. His findings challenged deficit perspectives that treat familiar-language use as linguistic avoidance, arguing instead that learners draw on their full linguistic repertoires as resources for learning. The present study extends this insight by showing how Zambian Grade 4 learners actively constructed peer support systems in response to English-medium instruction.

Home-School Language Discontinuity Reduced Opportunities for Independent English Practice

Learners' development was further shaped by linguistic environments beyond the classroom. In rural and other settings described by participants, English was rarely used at home. Learners returned to Bemba, Nyanja or other familiar languages after school. The school therefore carried much of the responsibility for creating opportunities to hear, speak, read and receive feedback in English.

Head Teacher 3: "It's very difficult, like us who are in the rural areas, because the learners are not using the English language in their home."

Head Teacher 2: "If they are there, they are very few. Most of them use Bemba."

Sociocultural theory emphasises that development is shaped by participation in social activity. If English is largely confined to school, learners have fewer everyday settings in which to internalise English forms through meaningful use. This does not imply that families should replace familiar languages with English. Rather, it means that school policy should not assume a level of English exposure that does not

exist. Schools may need more deliberate oral-language routines, reading opportunities, structured peer talk and accessible English print in order to compensate for limited exposure outside school.

The multilingual composition of communities also complicates any simple return to one Zambian language. Participants noted Bemba, Nyanja, Lozi and other languages within the same settings. The concept of a familiar language is therefore preferable to a fixed local language because pedagogical support must respond to the linguistic repertoires learners actually possess.

This finding resonates with Tambulukani and Bus's (2012) observation that linguistic diversity contributes to reading problems in Zambian schools. Their research found that learners who lacked exposure to English outside school struggled to develop English literacy, even when they received English-medium instruction. The present study extends this finding by showing how home-school language discontinuity affects not only literacy but also participation and comprehension across the curriculum.

Teacher and Learner Responses Formed a Sociocultural Support System

When the teacher and learner evidence is considered together, a coherent sociocultural pattern emerges. English-medium instruction increases linguistic demand. Teachers and learners mobilise mediational resources. These resources improve immediate comprehension and participation. Repeated support can create opportunities for progressively more independent English use. The same pattern also exposes implementation pressure. Continued dependence on compensatory strategies indicates that English readiness, materials, and teacher preparation remain uneven.

Table 1: Paired teacher and learner responses, evidence and theoretical significance

Teacher Response	Learner Response/Experience	Evidence	Sociocultural Significance
Phonics remediation	Foundational English needs	"They are almost like Grade 1 in terms of English"	Constructing temporary ZPD
Code-switching	Participation through familiar language	"Learners will not respond unless they translate into Bemba"	Semiotic mediation
Visual mediation	Concept recognition	"This mortar, this is Karende at home. So they relate."	Cultural tools
Peer grouping	Multilingual questioning	"Timafunsa" (We ask)	Peer scaffolding
Additional explanation	Uneven comprehension	"Only a few will be able to understand"	Social dimension of ZPD

The distinction between formative and summative assessment is therefore important. During formative assessment, teachers can use questioning, visual prompts, familiar-language clarification, oral explanation or demonstration to determine whether the difficulty lies in subject knowledge or in English expression. For example, a learner who cannot write the English term for a household object may still identify or explain its function when shown the object or when permitted initial familiar-language explanation. Such evidence can guide subsequent English vocabulary teaching.

Summative assessment is less flexible because standardised tasks may require English responses. The tension is that English can then function simultaneously as the medium of assessment and as an additional competence being tested, even when the intended construct is Science, Mathematics or another subject. The implication is not to remove English from assessment. It is to strengthen formative diagnostic practices during the transition so that teachers can identify whether low performance reflects conceptual misunderstanding, limited English expression or both.

Implications for Policy and Classroom Practice

The implications arise directly from the preceding findings rather than from a generic policy agenda. First, the evidence on translation and code-switching supports training in structured bilingual scaffolding. Teachers should be shown how to identify a comprehension gap, establish meaning through a familiar language or visual resource, explicitly reconnect the concept to English, require an English word or sentence at an attainable level, and gradually reduce support as learners become more independent.

Second, the findings on the double instructional demand support transition-specific professional development in phonics, vocabulary pre-teaching, oral-language development, multilingual group work and differentiation for learners with uneven English proficiency. One teacher reported that the demands of explanation could reduce a planned four lessons to two or three. This illustrates the direct relationship between linguistic mediation and curriculum pacing.

Teacher 1: "In a day, we are supposed to teach four lessons... But maybe you teach two, in some cases three, but mostly, it is two full-time."

Third, the resource findings support a minimum instructional package for Grade 4 English-medium classrooms. This package should include learner textbooks, teacher guides, graded readers, phonics and vocabulary materials, visual resources and reproducible teaching aids. Soft-copy distribution alone is insufficient where connectivity, data, printers and consumables are uneven.

Fourth, the learner-agency findings support structured peer learning rather than informal reliance on stronger pupils. Teachers can organise mixed-ability groups, define roles, monitor explanations and require a final return to English terminology.

Fifth, assessment reform should strengthen formative diagnosis so that conceptual understanding and English expression are not automatically conflated.

Finally, policy implementation should be phased and supported rather than treated as a single administrative switch. Curriculum change takes place within accumulated linguistic habits, teacher knowledge, material conditions and community expectations. A managed transition therefore requires sustained professional development, resource provision, school-level monitoring and opportunities to adjust support as learner English proficiency develops.

Limitations

The study was qualitative and based on four purposively selected public primary schools. The findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable to all Zambian schools. The cases cannot represent the full range of

urban, peri-urban, rural, linguistic and resource conditions across the country.

The study reflects a curriculum transition in which different cohorts and schools may have experienced different language-of-instruction arrangements. Documentary evidence confirms the coexistence of curriculum streams in at least one school. The materials available for this article do not provide a complete school-by-school chronology of each learner cohort.

The study did not generate longitudinal measures of English proficiency or subject achievement. It did not support robust subgroup comparisons by gender or prior attainment. Future research should follow learners over time and compare which combinations of bilingual scaffolding, English exposure and literacy support produce sustained gains.

Code-switching and multimodal communication are difficult to capture fully in field notes. Gesture, timing, gaze, object use and rapid language alternation can carry meaning that is not preserved in written observation records. Future work could incorporate systematic audio-video interaction analysis where ethically and practically feasible.

Conclusion

English-medium instruction in the selected Grade 4 classrooms was not experienced as a straightforward substitution of one classroom language for another. It altered the linguistic conditions through which learners accessed content, participated in interaction and demonstrated knowledge. Teachers responded by rebuilding foundational English, translating and code-switching, contextualising vocabulary, using visual tools, organising peer support and providing additional explanation. Learners responded with both aspiration and difficulty. They valued English and associated it with academic progression, yet many relied on familiar languages, peers, questions and visual cues to remain engaged.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides a coherent explanation for these responses. Familiar languages, peers, teachers, visual resources and locally meaningful objects operated as mediational tools that enabled learners to participate beyond their unaided English competence. The central pedagogical question is therefore not whether mediation should occur. It is whether support is structured so that it progressively expands independent English participation.

The article's principal contribution is its paired account of teacher and learner adaptation during a transitional policy moment. It shows that the language divide is bridged most effectively neither through abrupt monolingualism nor through indefinite dependence on translation. Instead, it is bridged through temporary, purposeful scaffolding linked to explicit English development. This requires practical professional development, adequate materials, diagnostically

sensitive assessment and policy implementation that recognises transition as a phased developmental process rather than an instantaneous administrative event.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

For Teacher Education and Professional Development:

- i. Teacher training institutions should incorporate structured bilingual scaffolding into pre-service and in-service programmes. Teachers need practical strategies for identifying comprehension gaps, establishing meaning through familiar languages or visual resources, explicitly reconnecting concepts to English, and gradually reducing support as learners become more independent.
- ii. Transition-specific professional development should address phonics, vocabulary pre-teaching, oral-language development, multilingual group work and differentiation for learners with uneven English proficiency.

For Curriculum and Materials Development:

- i. The Ministry of Education should provide a minimum instructional package for Grade 4 English-medium classrooms. This package should include learner textbooks, teacher guides, graded readers, phonics and vocabulary materials, visual resources and reproducible teaching aids.
- ii. Soft-copy distribution should be supplemented with print materials where connectivity, data, printers and consumables are uneven.

For Classroom Practice:

- i. Teachers should organise structured peer learning with clear tasks, defined roles, teacher monitoring and a deliberate return from familiar-language discussion to English terminology.
- ii. Formative assessment practices should distinguish conceptual understanding from English expression, using questioning, visual prompts, familiar-language clarification and oral explanation to diagnose the source of learner difficulties.

For Policy Implementation:

- i. Policy implementation should be phased and supported rather than treated as a single administrative switch. A managed transition requires sustained professional development, resource provision, school-level monitoring and opportunities to adjust support as learner English proficiency develops.

For Future Research:

- i. Longitudinal research should follow learners over time to identify which combinations of bilingual scaffolding, English exposure and literacy support produce sustained gains in English proficiency and subject achievement.

- ii. Future research should incorporate systematic audio-video interaction analysis to capture the multimodal dimensions of code-switching and scaffolding that field notes cannot fully preserve.

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