



From Language Policy to Classroom Practice: Navigating Pedagogical Challenges in the Transition to English-Medium Instruction in Zambia's Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

The transition to English-medium instruction in Grade 4 primary education in Zambia represents a significant change in the language through which learners access the curriculum. This transition is important because learners enter Grade 4 with varying levels of English proficiency and diverse linguistic experiences, which may affect comprehension, participation and assessment. This study examined the implementation of English-medium instruction in Grade 4 classrooms, focusing on learners' experiences, pedagogical challenges, teacher and learner strategies, and the institutional conditions shaping implementation. A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed in four primary schools. Data were generated through interviews with teachers, head teachers and education officials, learner focus group discussions, and document review, and were analysed thematically. The findings revealed a clear mismatch between Grade 4 curriculum expectations and the English proficiency of some learners. This mismatch affected comprehension, classroom participation, learner confidence and the demonstration of knowledge during assessment. Teachers and learners responded through translation, code-switching, repetition, phonics instruction, visual materials, peer learning, remedial support and the use of locally relevant examples. However, these strategies were constrained by inadequate learning materials, limited teacher preparation, staffing shortages, infrastructure challenges and fragmented implementation support. The study concludes that English-medium instruction is a mediated process shaped by learner readiness, teacher capacity, multilingual resources and institutional conditions. It contributes to language-of-instruction research by demonstrating that effective implementation should be assessed in terms of learners' access to and participation in learning, rather than English use alone. The findings support strengthened teacher preparation, structured multilingual scaffolding, adequate instructional resources and context-sensitive monitoring of language-transition implementation.

Keywords: English-Medium Instruction, Language of Instruction, Multilingualism, Code-Switching, Curriculum, Primary Education, Pedagogical Challenges, Multilingual Scaffolding.

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Introduction

Language of instruction plays a central role in determining learners' access to educational content, classroom participation and academic development. It is not simply a medium through which information is transmitted. It also shapes how learners understand concepts, interact with teachers and peers, express their knowledge and develop confidence in the learning process. When the language used for teaching differs significantly from the language with which learners are familiar, the transition may create additional challenges, particularly during the early years of formal education. These challenges can affect not only language development but also learners' access to subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Social Studies and practical skills.

The relationship between language of instruction and learning has received considerable attention in education research. Studies and international policy reports have consistently emphasised the importance of using familiar languages to support foundational learning, while introducing additional languages progressively and systematically. The World Bank (2021), for example, argues that language-of-instruction policies can influence learning outcomes, educational inclusion and equity, particularly where learners begin schooling in languages they do not adequately understand. Similarly, UNESCO (2025) highlights the importance of multilingual education approaches that recognise learners' home languages as resources for participation, comprehension and identity development. Research conducted in Zambia has also shown that teachers in multilingual classrooms frequently use translation, code-switching, repetition, visual materials and peer support to help learners access instruction when the official language of teaching is unfamiliar (Mkandawire et al., 2024).

In Zambia, language-of-instruction policy has undergone several changes in response to concerns about educational quality, national development and the role of English in wider social, economic and professional opportunities. English has historically occupied an important position in the Zambian education system, particularly in upper primary, secondary and tertiary education. At the same time, several Zambian languages have been used as media of instruction in the early grades. The transition from familiar local languages to English therefore represents an important educational moment because it involves more than a change in classroom vocabulary. It may also require learners to adjust to new ways of listening, reading, responding to questions, completing written tasks and demonstrating subject knowledge.

The transition can be particularly demanding in multilingual and rural school settings where learners have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. In such contexts, teachers may be required to teach grade-level content while simultaneously developing learners' English

vocabulary, pronunciation and comprehension. This situation can place additional demands on lesson preparation, classroom explanation, assessment and instructional time. Previous research on language-of-instruction implementation in Zambia has identified gaps between policy expectations, teacher preparation and classroom realities. Mandyata et al. (2024) found that teacher training does not always adequately prepare teachers for the practical linguistic and pedagogical demands encountered in multilingual classrooms. Such findings suggest that the effectiveness of language policy depends not only on the policy itself but also on the availability of teaching materials, teacher support, institutional preparedness and the linguistic resources of learners and communities.

The Grade 4 context is particularly important for examining these challenges. At this level, learners are expected to engage with increasingly complex subject content while developing the language required to understand instructions, participate in classroom activities and complete assessments. Where learners have not developed sufficient English proficiency, language may become an additional barrier to demonstrating knowledge. Teachers may respond by simplifying explanations, translating key concepts, returning to foundational literacy activities, using local examples or organising peer-supported learning. Although these practices may help learners access instruction, they may also reduce the time available for covering the prescribed curriculum, especially where teachers lack textbooks, teachers' guides, appropriate assessment materials and adequate professional support.

The implementation of English-medium instruction must therefore be understood in relation to the interaction between policy intentions and classroom conditions. A policy may prescribe a particular language of instruction, but its practical meaning is shaped by how teachers interpret and enact it, how learners respond to it, and what resources schools can mobilise. In multilingual classrooms, local languages may function not only as communication systems but also as pedagogical resources that support explanation, conceptual development and learner participation. At the same time, reliance on informal translation or unstructured code-switching may reflect institutional gaps rather than a coordinated language-support strategy.

Despite the importance of language-of-instruction policy in Zambia, there remains a need for context-specific evidence on how the transition to English is experienced by teachers and learners at school level. In particular, further understanding is required regarding the pedagogical challenges teachers encounter, the ways learners experience the linguistic and academic adjustment, the strategies used to manage language-related difficulties, and the institutional conditions that facilitate or constrain implementation. Examining these issues can provide evidence for

strengthening teacher preparation, instructional resources, learner support and language-policy implementation.

This study therefore examines the implementation of the transition to English-medium instruction in selected Grade 4 primary schools in Zambia. Specifically, it seeks to: (i) identify the pedagogical challenges teachers experience when implementing the language transition; (ii) examine how Grade 4 learners experience the linguistic, academic and sociocultural adjustment; (iii) identify the strategies used by teachers and learners to manage language-related challenges; and (iv) explore the institutional and policy conditions shaping implementation.

The study is significant because it brings together the perspectives of head teachers, classroom teachers, learners and provincial curriculum development stakeholders. By connecting policy-level expectations with classroom-level experiences, the study provides insight into the practical conditions under which language-of-instruction reforms are implemented. Its findings may inform teacher professional development, the provision of teaching and learning materials, multilingual classroom practices, learner-support mechanisms and future decisions concerning language-transition planning in Zambia.

Literature Review

The acquisition of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) remains a cornerstone of educational success worldwide. In Zambia, literacy development has been historically challenged by the complex interplay of language-of-instruction policies and socio-cultural realities. Central to this discourse is the transition from local mother tongues to English as the medium of instruction (MoI), a change increasingly occurring at Grade 4 due to recent curriculum reforms. This literature review critically examines the educational policies, classroom practices, and socio-linguistic challenges shaping this transition, providing a foundation for understanding the gaps and barriers teachers and learners encounter.

Historical and Policy Context

Zambia's language-of-instruction policies have long navigated tensions between local languages and English. Early reforms, such as the 1977 Educational Reform, recognised the cognitive benefits of mother tongue instruction but deemed its implementation impractical in the country's multilingual context, in favour of English as the dominant MoI after initial literacy development (Mkandawire, 2017; Siame et al., 2024). Subsequent policies in the 1990s, including "Focus on Learning" (1992) and "Educating Our Future" (1996), upheld local languages primarily as transitional tools in early literacy, with English maintained as the official language from Grade 2 onward (Mkandawire, 2017; Chileshe et al., 2018; Siame et al., 2024).

The launch of the Primary Reading Programme and its pilots in the late 1990s further entrenched local languages as instructional media in Grade 1, transitioning rapidly to English thereafter, a model that persisted until the 2013 National Literacy Framework. This framework marked a significant shift, extending local language use up to Grade 4, with English formally introduced as the MoI from Grade 5 (Chileshe et al., 2018). However, the 2023 curriculum reversed aspects of this approach, mandating English as the official MoI from Grade 1, including foundational grades, except when teaching local languages as specific subjects, effectively eliminating a transitional phase in early education (Curriculum Development Centre, 2023). This policy shift contrasts with existing evidence on language familiarity and its role in literacy acquisition, highlighting a potential misalignment between policy intent and classroom realities.

Challenges of the Language Transition

The abrupt shift to English as MoI in Grade 4 (or later, Grade 5 in previous policies) poses significant pedagogical and socio-cultural challenges. Learners often enter classrooms with limited exposure to or proficiency in English, especially in rural areas where indigenous languages dominate daily communication (Siame et al., 2026; Hangoma, 2026). This linguistic gap creates cognitive and affective dissonance, whereby learners expend considerable mental effort decoding the language itself rather than engaging with subject content, negatively impacting comprehension and participation (Hangoma, 2026; Matafwali & Bus, 2013).

Linguistic hurdles are compounded by insufficient teaching and learning materials in appropriate languages, limited teacher training, and inconsistent application of language policies in classrooms (Kombe & Mwanza, 2019; Mwanza & Mkandawire, 2020). Teacher preparedness emerges as a critical factor influencing the success of the language transition. Numerous studies report inadequate teacher training in bilingual pedagogy, instructional scaffolding, and curriculum changes, limiting teachers' capacity to support learners effectively during linguistic transitions (Kombe & Mwanza, 2019; Mwanza & Mkandawire, 2020; Siame, 2022). Insufficient resources, including textbooks predominantly in English rather than local languages, further hinder pedagogical implementation (Kombe & Mwanza, 2019).

Socio-Cultural Dimensions

Policy rigidity and monolingual testing frameworks marginalise learners less proficient in English, exacerbating inequities in educational outcomes (Hangoma, 2026; Banda & Mwanza, 2017; Siame et al., 2024). Rural learners experience particular disadvantages due to limited exposure to English outside formal education, crowded classrooms, and insufficient instructional support (Hangoma, 2026). These socio-cultural and infrastructural constraints contribute to persistent learning poverty, further disrupting foundational learning trajectories at critical transitional grades.

Gaps in the Literature

While quantitative studies and policy analyses outline the structural and pedagogical challenges of language transition in Zambia, ethnographic and qualitative research capturing the lived experiences of learners and teachers during this pivotal period remains scarce. Most existing work emphasises generalised outcomes and resource constraints but lacks in-depth exploration of socio-cultural dynamics, classroom negotiations, and coping mechanisms integral to understanding and improving the transition process (Kombe & Mwanza, 2019; Mwanza & Mkandawire, 2020; Siame et al., 2024).

Additionally, ambiguity persists about how curriculum reforms, such as the 2023 framework's early introduction of English, affect literacy development outcomes compared with earlier models that extended mother tongue instruction. This gap underscores the need for empirical inquiry into classroom realities and stakeholder perspectives to inform evidence-based policy refinement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), particularly its concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding, as elaborated by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976). Sociocultural theory posits that learning is a socially mediated process in which language plays a central role. Higher-order cognitive functions, including subject-matter understanding, emerge through social interaction and are internalised through the use of cultural tools, of which language is the most significant.

The ZPD refers to the distance between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable other, whether a teacher, peer or caregiver. Scaffolding describes the temporary support provided to learners within their ZPD, which is gradually withdrawn as learners gain competence. In multilingual classrooms, the language of instruction is not merely a neutral vehicle for content delivery but a cultural tool that either enables or constrains access to the ZPD.

The theory was used to foreground this study in three ways. First, it provided a lens for interpreting the linguistic mismatch identified in the findings. When Grade 4 learners lack sufficient English proficiency to access grade-level content, the language of instruction functions as a barrier rather than a tool, preventing teachers from working effectively within learners' ZPD. Second, the theory illuminated the pedagogical strategies teachers employed, including translation, code-switching, repetition, visual

materials and peer learning, as forms of scaffolding that bridge learners' existing linguistic resources and the demands of the English-medium curriculum. Third, sociocultural theory framed the institutional conditions, teacher preparation, instructional resources, staffing and policy communication as elements of the broader social and material context that mediates learning. Where these conditions are inadequate, the scaffolding available to learners is weakened, and the ZPD is narrowed.

This theoretical perspective aligns with recent scholarship on multilingual pedagogies, which emphasises that learners' full linguistic repertoires should be viewed as resources for learning rather than deficits (Mkandawire et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2025). It also supports the study's central argument that effective English-medium instruction must be assessed in terms of learners' access to and participation in learning, not merely the prescribed language of instruction.

Methodology

Research Design and Study Setting

The study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine the implementation of the transition to English-medium instruction in selected Grade 4 primary schools in Zambia. A qualitative approach, as Musonda and Siame (2025) and Siame and Chisenga (2026) suggest, was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, perceptions and practices within their natural school contexts. The study was conducted in Lusaka and Central Provinces. Four primary schools were purposively selected, comprising one peri-urban school and one typical rural school in each province. This comparative selection enabled the researchers to examine how language-transition experiences were shaped by differences in learners' exposure to English, community language practices, instructional resources and institutional conditions. The study also included provincial Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) participants to provide policy-level perspectives on curriculum development, policy communication, teacher orientation and implementation support.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select schools and participants with direct experience of the language-of-instruction transition. At each school, one head teacher and one Grade 4 teacher participated in an individual interview. One learner focus group discussion was conducted at each school. In addition, two CDC participants were interviewed. The study therefore comprised:

Table 1: Participant and Data Source Distribution

Participant or Data Source	Number
Head teachers	4
Grade 4 teachers	4
Learner focus group discussions	4
Provincial CDC participants	2
Schools where classroom observations were conducted	4

Head teachers were selected because of their knowledge of school-level implementation, staffing and resource conditions. Grade 4 teachers were selected because they were directly responsible for classroom instruction during the transition. Learners provided first-hand accounts of comprehension, participation and adjustment, while CDC participants contributed policy-level perspectives on curriculum development, policy communication and implementation support.

Data Collection

Data were triangulated through four methods. First, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, learner focus group discussions, non-participant classroom observations and documentary review (Siame and Chisenga, 2026). Semi-structured interviews with head teachers, Grade 4 teachers and CDC participants explored learners' English-language readiness, pedagogical challenges, teacher preparation, instructional resources, classroom language practices, learner participation, institutional support and policy implementation. Four learner FGDs were conducted, one at each school. The discussions examined learners' experiences of classroom language, lesson comprehension, participation, language use at home and school, peer support, visual materials and the use of familiar local languages to support understanding. Non-participant classroom observations were conducted in the four schools to examine how the language-of-instruction policy was enacted during actual lessons. The observations focused on teachers' language use, code-switching, translation, explanations of unfamiliar concepts, learner participation, peer interaction, use of teaching aids and teachers' responses to language-related misunderstandings. Observation notes also captured classroom conditions and teaching practices that might not have been fully reflected in interviews or focus group discussions. Relevant curriculum and policy documents, instructional materials and available school-level records were also reviewed to provide contextual information about policy expectations, teacher orientation, curriculum requirements and the availability of teaching and learning resources.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically (Siame et al., 2026) using NVivo through a process of familiarisation, coding, categorisation, theme development and interpretation. Interview transcripts, focus group records, classroom observation notes, and documentary materials were reviewed to identify recurring issues related to the research objectives.

Initial codes included language barriers, learner comprehension, English terminology, classroom participation, inadequate teaching materials, teacher preparation, translation, code-switching, visual aids, peer support, remedial instruction and policy communication. Related codes were grouped into broader categories and compared across participant groups and school contexts, including peri-urban and rural settings. The analysis was organised around four broad areas:

1. Pedagogical challenges associated with the language transition
2. Learners' linguistic, academic and socio-cultural experiences
3. Teacher and learner coping and adaptation strategies
4. Institutional and policy conditions shaping implementation

Classroom observation data were used to corroborate, qualify or extend participants' reported experiences. This helped the researchers examine the relationship between reported practices and actual classroom interactions.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was strengthened through methodological and source triangulation. Interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations and documentary review provided evidence from different sources and perspectives. Credibility was supported by including head teachers, teachers, learners and CDC participants. Dependability was enhanced through the use of research instruments aligned with the study objectives. Confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in participant accounts and observation records, while representative quotations were retained to demonstrate the connection between the data and the findings. Transferability was addressed by describing the provincial, school and socio-geographical contexts, particularly the distinction between peri-urban and rural schools.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee under Certificate Reference Number: KNU-REC03-2026-002. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the relevant educational authorities and participating schools. Participation was voluntary, and adult participants provided informed consent after receiving information about the purpose and procedures of the study. The required parental or guardian consent and learner assent

procedures were followed for learner participation. Permission was obtained for classroom observations, which were conducted without disrupting normal teaching activities. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising participants and schools where necessary. Participants were identified using labels such as Head Teacher 1, Teacher 1, Learner FGD 1 and CDC Participant 1. Information collected through interviews, focus group discussions, observations and document review was used solely for research purposes.

Results and Discussion

Overview of Findings

The findings show that the transition to English-medium instruction in Grade 4 was experienced as more than a change in classroom language. It affected learners' access to curriculum content, participation, confidence, assessment, teacher workload and classroom support strategies. Across the four schools, participants described a recurring gap between the English demands of the Grade 4 curriculum and learners' existing language proficiency. The gap was more evident among learners with limited exposure to English outside school and in schools with inadequate textbooks and supplementary learning materials. Four interconnected themes emerged:

1. Linguistic mismatch and restricted curriculum access
2. Learner participation, confidence and academic adjustment
3. Multilingual and peer-supported strategies
4. Institutional and policy conditions shaping implementation

Linguistic Mismatch and Restricted Curriculum Access

Learners' English Proficiency and Grade-Level Expectations

A consistent finding was that many learners entered Grade 4 without sufficient English proficiency to engage comfortably with the curriculum. Head teachers and teachers described learners whose English remained at a foundational level, requiring teachers to revisit sounds, phonics, vocabulary and basic reading skills.

Head Teacher 1 explained:

"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."

The participant further noted:

"The foundation deals with sounds, then we go back to the Jolly Phonics."

Head Teacher 1 reported a similar experience and explained that Grade 1 and Grade 2 phonics materials, including the 42 sounds, were used to strengthen learners' foundational

English skills. Teachers were therefore required to teach Grade 4 content while simultaneously developing the English skills needed to access that content.

This finding resonates with Mandyata et al. (2024), who identified gaps between teacher training and the practical linguistic demands of multilingual classrooms in Zambia. It also supports the World Bank's (2021) argument that language-of-instruction policies can affect learning, equity and inclusion when learners are expected to learn through a language they do not adequately understand. From a sociocultural perspective, the mismatch between curriculum expectations and learners' actual proficiency means that teachers cannot work within learners' ZPD without first addressing foundational language skills, which reduces time available for grade-level content.

Language Barriers in Understanding Subject Content

Language difficulties extended beyond basic literacy to subject-specific terminology. Teacher 2 explained:

"It's quite challenging. Yes, you start especially with this new curriculum that we are having. The topics, especially the topics that we have in science. You know, these are children who are coming from a local language to English."

The teacher identified concepts such as the circulatory and respiratory systems as particularly difficult because learners had to understand both the concepts and unfamiliar English terminology.

Teacher 1 described a similar challenge in Home Economics:

"When you just mention in English, the children will not understand."

Teachers therefore used drawings and familiar local-language terms alongside English. For example, a winnower was linked to *Bope*, while a mortar was linked to *Karende*. These strategies helped learners connect new English terms with familiar objects and experiences. This finding aligns with Mkandawire et al. (2024), who documented similar instructional strategies used by teachers in multilingual Zambian classrooms, including translation, code-switching and the use of local examples to support non-speakers of the language of instruction.

Language and Assessment

Participants also reported that English proficiency affected learners' performance in tests and examinations. Head Teacher 2 explained that some learners left assessment items unanswered when questions were presented in English, even where they may have understood the underlying concept.

This suggests that assessment performance was sometimes influenced by the language of the assessment as well as by learners' subject knowledge. Teachers consequently faced difficulty distinguishing between a lack of conceptual

These resources were particularly important where verbal explanations in English were difficult to follow. This finding resonates with Chamberlain, Rodriguez-Leon and Woodward (2022), who highlight the importance of oracy and multimodal approaches in disrupting language-of-instruction policy at the classroom level in South Africa and Zambia.

Peer Support and Collaborative Learning

Learners relied on classmates when they experienced difficulties with English. One learner stated:

"We ask each other."

Learners described group work, peer explanations and the use of familiar languages to clarify lesson content. Teacher 4 explained that learners with stronger English skills were sometimes grouped with those requiring additional support. Peer support provided immediate assistance and created opportunities for learners to participate in a less threatening environment. However, teachers remained responsible for ensuring that peer support complemented rather than replaced formal instruction. From a sociocultural perspective, peer support represents a form of scaffolding within the ZPD, where more knowledgeable peers assist learners in accessing content that they could not yet manage independently.

Phonics, Remedial and Catch-Up Support

Schools also responded through phonics, repetition, remedial lessons and Catch-Up programmes. Head Teacher 2 reported that a Grade 2 teacher with Jolly Phonics experience was attached to support Grade 4 learners' reading and speaking skills. These interventions provided additional learning opportunities, although their availability varied between schools and often depended on individual school initiatives and available personnel. This finding supports Siame (2022), who argues that teacher education must better prepare teachers for the practical demands of multilingual classrooms.

Institutional and Policy Conditions

Inadequate Teaching and Learning Materials

Shortages of textbooks, teachers' guides, supplementary readers, dictionaries and phonics materials were repeatedly identified as major constraints. Head Teacher 1 stated:

"The materials are not adequate in any way."

Some materials were available only in soft copy, creating difficulties for schools with limited internet access, printing facilities or financial resources. The documentary review also identified shortages of supplementary reading materials, including limited library resources at Malambanyama Primary School. The above challenges are summarised in **Figure 3:**

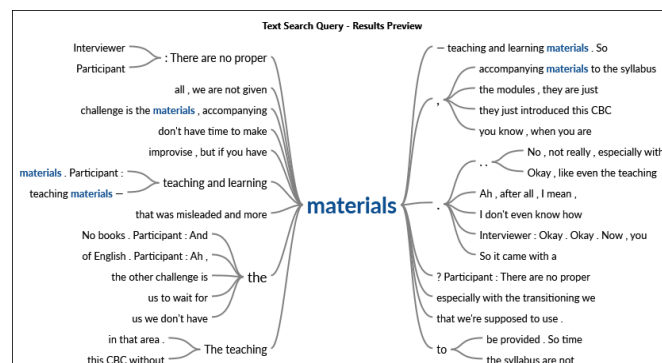


Figure 3: A summary of material challenges

Teachers consequently developed their own charts, used older books, borrowed materials from lower grades and conducted additional research. This finding aligns with Kombe and Mwanza (2019), who found that insufficient resources, including textbooks predominantly in English rather than local languages, hinder pedagogical implementation in Zambian classrooms.

Teacher Preparation and Orientation

Participants reported receiving some policy orientation but questioned whether this provided sufficient practical preparation. Head Teacher 2 explained:

"They did not fully understand the way it's supposed to be done. Even when they went for orientation, it's like even those people who were orienting them, they didn't have that full knowledge."

A CDC participant similarly stated:

"My problem is the capacity building to handle the transition. That is where I have a problem. I still strongly feel teacher education did not do a good job."

The participant also noted challenges within cascade training:

"Sometimes along the way information is diluted; sometimes commitment, you know, it's not clear."

This finding supports Mandyata et al. (2024), who identified gaps between teacher training and classroom practice in language of instruction in Zambia, and Mwanza and Mkandawire (2020), who reported inadequate teacher training in bilingual pedagogy and instructional scaffolding.

Staffing, Infrastructure and Classroom Conditions

Large classes, inadequate desks, limited classroom space and insufficient specialist facilities were also reported. Some learners reportedly sat on the floor, while some schools lacked laboratories and Home Economics facilities. These conditions limited teachers' ability to provide individual support, organise group learning and use practical teaching approaches. Inadequate staffing further increased the workload associated with supporting learners with different levels of English proficiency. This finding is consistent with Hangoma (2026), who identified crowded classrooms and insufficient instructional support as particular disadvantages for rural learners.

Policy Communication and Implementation Support

Schools communicated the language policy through assemblies, staff meetings, stakeholder meetings and community engagements. However, participants distinguished between knowing what the policy required and having the capacity to implement it.

One CDC participant described the broader support system as:

"The support system was there for various system holders, but it was disintegrated; it was hard."

This suggests that curriculum implementation, teacher preparation, assessment and school-level support were not always sufficiently coordinated. From a policy-enactment perspective, this finding illustrates the distinction between policy awareness and implementation capacity, where teachers interpret and adapt policy according to learner needs, professional knowledge and the resources available within their schools.

Rural and Peri-Urban Differences

The findings indicate that the transition was shaped by local context. Rural learners generally had fewer opportunities to encounter English outside school, while rural schools also reported greater constraints in access to printed materials, internet connectivity, infrastructure and staffing. Peri-urban schools also experienced challenges with comprehension, vocabulary and participation, but learners could have greater exposure to English through the wider social environment and access to educational resources. The findings therefore indicate that schools did not experience the language transition under identical linguistic or institutional conditions. This supports the equity concerns raised by Hangoma (2026) and Banda and Mwanza (2017), who argue that the same language policy may produce different learning conditions across school contexts.

Integrated Interpretation

Taken together, the findings indicate that the implementation of English-medium instruction is a mediated process rather than a direct application of policy. The process can be represented as:

Language policy → institutional conditions → teacher mediation → learner experience → access to learning

Where these elements are aligned, learners are more likely to access the curriculum and participate meaningfully. Where they are poorly aligned, language transition may constrain comprehension, participation and the demonstration of knowledge. The central implication is that successful language transition depends on more than specifying English as the medium of instruction. It requires alignment between learner readiness, teacher capacity, multilingual pedagogical strategies, instructional resources and the institutional conditions in which policy is implemented. This interpretation is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978)

sociocultural theory, which holds that learning is socially mediated and that the tools available to learners, including language, shape their cognitive development.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative multiple-case study design, while appropriate for exploring lived experiences and classroom practices, limits the generalisability of the findings. The study was conducted in four primary schools in Lusaka and Central Province, and the experiences of teachers and learners in other provinces or in different socio-linguistic contexts may differ.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews and focus group discussions, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Although classroom observations were used to corroborate reported practices, the presence of researchers may have influenced teachers' and learners' behaviour during observed lessons.

Third, the study focused on Grade 4, which is a critical transition point, but did not follow learners longitudinally to examine how their English proficiency and academic performance developed over time. Longitudinal research would provide stronger evidence on the long-term effects of the language transition.

Fourth, the study did not include a comparative analysis of learner assessment outcomes before and after the transition, which would have strengthened the evidence on the relationship between language of instruction and academic performance.

Finally, the study was conducted during a period of curriculum reform, and the findings may reflect the specific challenges of implementing the 2023 curriculum framework. Future research should examine how the transition evolves as policy implementation matures.

Conclusion

This study examined the implementation of English-medium instruction in Grade 4 primary classrooms in Zambia, focusing on pedagogical challenges, learner experiences, teacher and learner strategies, and the institutional and policy conditions shaping implementation. The findings show that the transition is a multidimensional process involving linguistic, pedagogical, institutional and social adjustment. Learners entered Grade 4 with varying levels of English proficiency, while teachers were required to teach content, develop English literacy and respond to diverse linguistic backgrounds simultaneously.

Limited English proficiency affected learners' comprehension, participation, confidence and ability to demonstrate knowledge in assessment. Teachers responded through simplified and repeated explanations, translation,

phonics and literacy support, visual and locally relevant examples, peer learning and remedial assistance. Learners also actively negotiated the transition by seeking clarification, using familiar languages, working with peers and drawing on visual materials. These practices demonstrate teacher and learner agency, while also highlighting gaps in formal implementation support.

The findings further show that multilingualism can serve as a pedagogical resource rather than only a barrier. Strategic use of familiar languages can support comprehension and participation while learners develop English proficiency. However, such support should function as a structured bridge towards greater independence in English rather than a permanent substitute for English development.

Implementation is also shaped by wider institutional conditions, including shortages of learning materials, limited digital and printing facilities, inadequate staffing, uneven teacher preparation, limited institutional support and restricted English exposure outside school. The policy-practice gap therefore reflects the interaction between policy expectations and the material, linguistic and institutional conditions in which teachers and learners operate.

The study contributes to the language-of-instruction literature by showing that language transition should be assessed in terms of learning access and outcomes, rather than English use alone. Successful transition requires learners to understand instruction, participate meaningfully, develop literacy and academic language, demonstrate knowledge and progress through the education system. Drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the study demonstrates that language is not merely a medium of instruction but a cultural tool that mediates learning within the Zone of Proximal Development. Where learners' linguistic resources are recognised and strategically used, teachers can provide effective scaffolding; where they are ignored or suppressed, the ZPD is narrowed, and learning is constrained.

The findings therefore support a coordinated and evidence-informed approach to English-medium instruction in Zambia. English remains important for educational progression, but its development should be supported through appropriate teacher preparation, adequate resources, structured multilingual scaffolding, targeted learner support and appropriate assessment. Gradual bilingual approaches may also warrant consideration, but their timing and structure should be established through systematic piloting and longitudinal research.

Based on the findings, the study makes five priority recommendations:

i. Develop a structured language-transition framework

The Ministry of Education should establish a clear framework outlining the progression of English oral language,

vocabulary, phonics, reading, writing and subject-specific academic language across the early primary grades. The framework should also guide teachers on the strategic use of familiar languages to support comprehension while progressively developing independent English use. This framework should be informed by sociocultural principles of scaffolding and the ZPD, ensuring that support is calibrated to learners' developing proficiency.

ii. Strengthen teacher preparation and professional development

Pre-service and in-service teacher education should develop practical competencies for multilingual classrooms, including language bridging, purposeful code-switching, phonics, vocabulary development, differentiated instruction, multimodal teaching, peer learning and formative assessment. Coaching, mentoring, demonstration lessons and school-based professional learning should complement formal training. Teacher education should explicitly address the sociocultural role of language in learning and the pedagogical value of learners' home languages.

iii. Provide adequate resources for the Grade 4 transition

The transition should be supported by timely provision of textbooks, teacher guides, graded English readers, phonics materials, bilingual vocabulary resources, visual materials and locally relevant reading materials. Where digital access is limited, suitable printed and offline alternatives should be provided. Resource provision should be informed by context-specific needs assessments that account for rural and peri-urban differences.

iv. Institutionalise multilingual scaffolding and targeted learner support

Schools should be guided to use familiar languages strategically as a bridge to English. Teachers should connect local-language explanations to English vocabulary, concepts and oral expression. Diagnostic assessment at the beginning of Grade 4 should identify learners requiring additional support, followed by targeted catch-up and remedial programmes. Peer support and collaborative learning should be formally recognised as pedagogical strategies that operate within learners' ZPD.

v. Establish learner-centred monitoring and feedback systems

Monitoring should assess more than teachers' use of English. It should include learner comprehension, participation, reading development, vocabulary growth, confidence, assessment performance, teacher preparedness, availability of resources and the use of multilingual scaffolding. Evidence from teachers, learners and schools should inform curriculum development, teacher education, assessment and policy decisions. Monitoring should also track equity dimensions, ensuring that rural and peri-urban schools receive proportionate support.

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