

# Learning literacy in a familiar language: comparing reading and comprehension competence in Bemba in two contrasting settings in Northern Zambia

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*Abstract:* The latest language in education policy in Zambia is to use a ‘familiar’ language in the initial stages of education before transitioning into a regional and later foreign language medium. Investigating the use of a familiar language—Namwanga—in Northern Zambia, in the context of a regional language—Bemba—the article shows that learning of literacy in the regional language is better supported by classrooms that allow free use of the ‘home’ language or mother tongue. Results from a reading and comprehension task show no hindrance to the achievement of reading fluency in a regional language when a familiar language is encouraged in the classroom. The article provides support for multi-literacies developed through languages that learners are exposed to in their environment rather than a foreign language.

*Keywords:* Medium of instruction, familiar language, literacy, multi-literacies, reading fluency, regional language, mother tongue, Zambia.

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## 1 Introduction

The multilingual situation in many African contexts presents many challenges for selecting mediums of instruction. With 73 indigenous languages (CSO 2012), Zambia is no different. This article considers a particular case in relation to the selection of a medium of instruction in a context in Northern Zambia where the regulated regional language offers different advantages to learners depending on whether they are mother tongue speakers of the regional language or not.

Of these 73 languages, seven have the status of national languages, with English (outside of the 73) as the official language. The seven national languages are based on region and are also referred to as regional official languages that are used as lingua franca in the 10 provinces of Zambia. These are Cinyanja, Chitonga, IciBemba, Kiiikaonde, Lunda, Luvale and Silozi.<sup>1</sup> These languages are used as media of instruction in the first four years of primary school but are also the regional languages used in local courts, mass media and for political mobilisation. The policy to have the first four years taught in one of the regional languages holds mainly in government schools and also much more so in rural than in urban schools. The use of only the regional languages in schools in any particular province means that children who speak other languages—any of the other 66 indigenous languages—must learn through a second Bantu language. This situation therefore affects a high number of learners, and we are particularly interested in this question as it relates to learning literacy in reading and comprehension.

It is now widely accepted that learning through a mother tongue (MT) achieves better outcomes for learners, and organisations like UNESCO recommend the use of mother tongues at least in the early years rather than learning through a second foreign language (UNESCO 2011; Alidou *et al.* 2006). A term used in this context as a good alternative to the MT is a ‘familiar’ language. We aim to explore the performance of learners when a familiar language is used. We will provide some contextualisation of how ‘familiar’ can be understood and compare learners in a familiar context vs. a MT context.

This study was conducted as part of an ongoing larger collaborative project focusing on ways in which multilingual practices can be harnessed to improve classroom learning in three sub-Saharan African contexts: Botswana, Tanzania and Zambia. This larger work aims to understand how the multilingual realities of learners in their day-to-day life outside the classroom contrasts with the classroom situation and how

<sup>1</sup> Some languages cover more than one province and some provinces are represented by more than one language. IciBemba is spoken in the Copperbelt, Northern, Luapula, and Muchinga provinces and urban parts of central province. Zambian language names, like other Bantu languages, usually belong to a nominal class whose prefix e.g. *ici-*, *ci-* *ki-* is used with the language name. We may sometimes drop this prefix in writing. Nothing hinges on this contrast.

the natural multilingualism in all three contexts can be brought to bear on classroom practices. This article reports on a specific study in the context of Zambia. The data reported on in the study was as such part of other forms of data collected, including classroom observations, teachers, parent and learner interviews, focus group discussions and data collected through questionnaires. These data provide a rich background on which the specific study on achievements in reading fluency and comprehension by Grade 4 learners is to be understood. The study was conducted in Northern Zambia, which like the rest of the country is multilingual.

Focusing on Northern Zambia, we will look at Namwanga-speaking children from Nakonde, a town on the Tanzanian border, who learn through Bemba as the regional official language, as a familiar language. We will contrast this with another location, Kasama, the provincial capital/headquarters of the Northern Province, where the majority of people are Bemba speaking and children learning through Bemba generally speak Bemba as their MT. The reading data we report on in this article is part of ongoing work that aims to compare the reading abilities of learners in both urban and rural settings of these two areas. The rationale for this is that urban settings are more likely to have a higher use of Bemba and possibly incorporate other languages while rural settings are more likely to use local dialects and have fewer other languages; we would like to know whether this has any effect on learning. We currently have data from more urban settings, and our findings are therefore to be further enhanced by the next phase of data collection in rural settings away from the main town in each case.<sup>2</sup> As is to be expected, the urban schools are more multilingual than the rural schools because of the many government, civil and other workers who are posted to these locations from different regions of the country. Our results are therefore to be understood insofar as they relate to this specific setting.

We provide an overview of the language in education policy of Zambia in section 2 and then consider some current thinking on reading in multilingual contexts in section 3, followed by the reading fluency and comprehension study, including the findings in sections 4–8. In section 9, we provide some discussion of teachers' practices

<sup>2</sup> Data was collected in February–March 2019. Primary schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic before rural schools could be reached. Data collection in the more rural schools is due to be conducted in 2021–2. By urban settings we refer to towns, which are regionally important as areas of trade and/or administration, with government offices that attract civil servants from different regions of the country. Schools in these areas that we term 'urban schools' usually have more multilingual student populations owing to the mobility of the inhabitants in these settings. However, the lingua franca is usually the official regional language. Rural settings are mainly small towns or villages/clusters of villages where the student population in schools is more monolingual, made up of smaller communities who speak the same language and in many cases have been inhabitants in the same areas for long durations with less mobility and usually correlate to what are termed as 'tribes'. In these settings also the official regional language would be the medium of instruction in schools, referred to here as 'rural schools'.

in the classroom and also consider some data from interviews with parents as well as teachers, which provides further insight into the context in which learners were schooling, particularly in the familiar language context. We have a discussion in section 10 and end with some conclusions in the final section.

## **2 Language in education policy and literacy in Zambia**

Zambia has been grappling with poor literacy achievements among primary school learners for more than five decades. The schooling system is divided into seven years of primary school, comprising Grades 1 to 7, and five years of secondary school, comprising Grades 8 to 12. There is a national exam in Grade 7, at which point those who are successful progress to Grade 8. At Grade 9, there is a junior secondary school national exam to progress to senior secondary school from Grade 10 to 12. Literacy, which is taught in Zambian languages in primary school, is expected to be successfully achieved by Grade 4, from which point the medium of instruction is exclusively English. [Kelly \(2000\)](#), in his report on the first countrywide baseline study of reading achievement of learners in Grades 1–6, attributed the poor literacy levels (and educational achievements in general) to the language in education policy adopted a year after independence in 1965. The policy from 1965 to 1996 was that English was to be used as the sole medium of instruction in the entire education system. [Kelly \(2000: 7\)](#) argues that this policy resulted in a ‘schooled but uneducated generation’ characterised by learners who lacked creativity and inventiveness, engaged in rote learning and memorisation instead of understanding and, more importantly, were largely illiterate. The country had abandoned the three-language policy that had been in place during the colonial period from 1927 up to independence. In this policy, first recommended by the Phelps Stokes Commission in 1924 ([Ohannessian 1978: 279](#)), children began their education in ‘a tribal language’, which we can understand as a Bantu mother tongue, in the lower grades before transitioning to a Bantu lingua franca (that is, a regional Bantu language) in the middle grades. In the upper grades the medium of instruction then shifted to the use of English. This was implemented as follows: in the first two grades, children learnt through the medium of their MT, and in the third grade they were taught in one of the regional official languages if this was not the same as the MT, and finally in the fifth grade English became the medium of instruction. Conversations with adults who went through this system of education impressionistically suggest that this policy was more effective at imparting literacy skills to learners so that even learners who dropped out of school in the first three years were literate enough to, for example, write letters.

After the English medium programme was implemented, however, it became clear that the majority of learners were graduating from primary school barely able to read

and write. This was contrary to the claim made by those who recommended the adoption of the English medium of instruction from Grade 1 that the earlier the learners started using English, the better would be their spoken and written English.

In a policy document entitled *Focus on Learning* (1992), government acknowledged that ‘Too early an emphasis on learning through English means that the majority of children form hazy and indistinct concepts in language, mathematics, science and social studies’ (p. 28). They went on to point out that the use of English as a sole medium of instruction downgraded the indigenous languages and did not foster appreciation for the learner’s cultural heritage. The exclusive use of English also made the school an alien institution in the community. In spite of being aware of the negative consequences of an English-only medium of instruction on children’s education, no practical steps were taken to change the language policy for the better. Williams (1998), for example, found that Zambian learners in Grades 3, 4 and 6, on average, were unable to read texts two grades below their level. He also found that Zambian learners were not performing better than Malawian learners in English literacy in spite of the fact that the latter began their education in the local language (Chichewa) before shifting to the English medium in Grade 4. In addition, the Malawian learners outperformed the Zambian learners in local language literacy. Another study in 1995 conducted as part of the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) assessed literacy and numeracy levels in the education system and reported that only 25.8% of the learners in Grade 6 could read at a level defined by teachers as minimum and only 2.3% at the desired level (SACMEQ 1998).

In 1996, as a way of arresting the falling literacy levels in primary school, the government replaced the ‘straight into English’ policy with one which allowed for the use of Zambian languages as languages of initial literacy instruction in Grades 1–4 but retained English as the official medium of instruction in all the other subjects (MOE 1996). In practice, in the new Primary Reading Programme (PRP), initial literacy was taught in one of the seven regional official languages in the first grade, but was closely followed by the introduction of English in the second grade. During the pilot stage of the literacy component of the Primary Reading Programme, which was called the New Breakthrough to Literacy (NBTL), the results of the learners’ reading performance were very promising: children were breaking through to literacy within a year and the reviewers claimed they were reading at a level equivalent to Grade 4 or higher (Linehan 2004). However, the abrupt shift to English literacy in the second grade appeared to arrest the development of reading skills in the local languages, and learners were unable to transfer their literacy skills from Zambian languages to English as envisaged in the policy document *Educating Our Future* (MOE 1996).

Many new studies and assessments by both the Ministry of Education and non-governmental organisations on learners’ literacy have since then continued to report low literacy levels in primary schools. For example, SACMEQ (III) of 2010 reported that

only 27.4 per cent of Grade 6 learners tested in reading fluency read at the basic competence level. This and similar reports prompted government to once again reconsider its language in education policy in 2013. The Primary Literacy Programme (PLP) was then launched through a National Literacy Framework (MESVTEE 2013), and this came with a change in the language in education policy that now stipulated that the medium of instruction in the first four grades would be in a ‘familiar’ Zambian language, rather than just the regional languages. Literacy would initially be in familiar Zambian languages while literacy in English would be introduced in Grade 3 after an oral English course, which would start in Grade 2. English would be used as a medium of instruction starting in Grade 5. This was a full circle return to the language in education policy in the colonial period up to independence. However, the main difference between this and the pre-independence policy was in allowing initial literacy in any mother tongue without restriction to the seven official regional languages. This was a significant shift in all those areas where languages other than the seven regional languages are spoken. The National Literacy Framework (MESVTEE 2013: 12) acknowledges the importance of using a ‘familiar language’ (which seems to be used interchangeably and broadly understood as a mother tongue) and recommends that instruction be ‘in a familiar language, so as to build learners’ arsenal for learning to read in other languages as well as learning content subjects.

However, in the subsequent Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (MESVTEE 2015), the term ‘familiar language’ is, unfortunately and counter to the wider language embracing approach expected, used in a rather more restricted way that is not equivalent to the mother tongue. It is defined as a local language that is commonly used by children in a particular locality. It could be a zone or community language (ibid., vi). Furthermore, in discussing the language of instruction, the document treats a familiar language as one of the seven zonal/regional languages: Cinyanja, Chitonga, Icibemba, Kiikaonde, Lunda, Luvale and Silozi, as well as widely used community languages in specific school catchment areas. How to select these ‘widely used community languages’ or decide which languages count within this framework is not clarified and essentially boils down to the dominant use of the regional languages. Some language groups not represented by the seven official regional languages, and which can be deemed to be widely used community languages, have attempted to use their languages in primary schools but have not been successful or suffer many impediments due to the lack of resources and the inability to financially support such approaches without government assistance. Namwanga is one such language where an attempt was made in the 1990s to the early 2000s. An association of Namwanga speakers (mainly educationists) produced a language course for Grade 1 called *Chinamwanga amatampulo: ibuuku lyamusambiliizi* (Mulilo 2005): ‘Steps in Chinamwanga: a learner’s coursebook’. However, this was ultimately unsuccessful due to lack of funding as well as apathy from some teachers and learners

in implementing it. As a result, Namwanga-speaking children have continued to learn through IciBemba, the regional official language in the area. Thus, the very encouraging policy to use familiar languages seems to practically revert to using only the regional national languages in early years.

### **3 MLE perspectives on reading fluency and comprehension**

Contemporary work on multilingual education (MLE) strongly advocates viewing the multilingual repertoires of learners as resources that should be exploited to ensure effective learning. [Benson \(2013: 11\)](#) argues that MLE must be viewed as ‘a systematic approach to learning that builds on the learner’s home language, knowledge and experiences to teach literacies, languages and the rest of the curriculum’. In terms of reading, [Benson \(2013\)](#) points out that most Early Grade Reading Assessments are based on monolingual, usually English speakers and that such methods, when transferred to multilingual contexts, have limited effectiveness. [Benson \(ibid.\)](#) advocates that approaches to literacy must be adapted to the contexts of use and that effective practices must aim to demonstrably improve the learners’ quality of life and be ‘socially, culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable’ (p. 6) and, as such, must be understood and developed in the context of practice. [Benson](#) offers a view of literacy that is ideological and where ‘literacies vary by cultures and conditions, that engaging with true literacy is a social act, and that multiple modes of literacy or literacies are presented in learners’ backgrounds, experiences and future needs’ ([Benson 2013: 9–10](#)). In adopting this ideological model of literacy, we must guard against equating learning reading to literacy and further equating literacy to education. Rather, we must appreciate the multiplicity of literacies that particularly multilingual contexts provide. We must be more concerned with ‘communicative practices’ and aim to understand how languages are comfortably and seamlessly used in different contexts; in navigating social relations outside the classroom and at home; in negotiating power relations in the classroom; in managing local identities and cultures; and in contributing to wider regional, national and international discourses.

Testing and learning reading are not just about developing isolated decoding skills but must be connected to comprehension, and it is now well established that such comprehension is best served by the use of a mother tongue or a language in which learners have comfortable competence that would allow automaticity in reading. As [Kuhn et al. \(2010\)](#) argue, the ability to develop automaticity in reading with effortlessness and a lack of conscious awareness relies on simultaneous awareness of what is being decoded, which is based on the ability of learners to speak and understand a language. [Sphernes and Ruto-Korir \(2018\)](#) argue in a similar vein that languages learnt through a spontaneous process better facilitate the learning of reading and

comprehension than do foreign languages learnt through non-spontaneous or academic processes.

The other important consideration for reading and another reason why literacy-learning strategies developed in the north are less applicable to the south, at least in sub-Saharan Africa, is differences between orthographies and other linguistic features like phonology and morphology. For example, the difference between shallow and deep orthographies significantly affects how reading is taught and should be taken into consideration (Schroeder 2013; Mwansa 2017). Shallow orthographies are those where there are consistent correspondences between letters and the sounds they represent in the language. Zambian languages are good examples of these. In deep orthographies, as represented by English, there are many inconsistencies in the correspondences between letters and the sounds they represent in the language, many of these owing to the historical development of the language. For example, some letters can represent more than one sound or a sound can be represented by more than one letter in English, which is never the case in Zambian languages. While it is easier to teach learners in shallow orthographies to associate letters with sounds and thus be able to decode (sound out) any word, in deep orthographies different strategies more reliant on word recognition or the use of rhymes used to teach reading. Thus, while the former orthography favours the identification of syllables, the latter is better suited to the identification of words.

#### 4 The current study

We begin by providing some background on how reading is taught in Zambian primary schools. The new Literacy Programme in Zambian languages uses the synthetic phonics approach, which simply means that children learn individual letter sounds (letter names are not taught initially) and then blend them into syllables and finally words. The first sounds that are taught are the five vowels: *a e i o u*. Then the consonant sounds are introduced, starting with the most frequently occurring sound/letter in the language to the least, as calculated using a corpus of literature in each of the seven regional official languages. The idea behind this is to enable learners to begin reading as quickly as possible since they would be exposed to the most commonly occurring sounds in words early.

The first step in teaching a letter sound is to introduce it orally through a phonemic awareness exercise. Children are shown a picture of an object or person or one depicting an activity to identify or name the initial target letter. The children are taught how to pronounce it and then the teacher writes the letter that represents the sound on the board. After practising how to write it as a small and capital letter, it

is then blended with a vowel at a time. For example, if ‘m’ is the target sound, it is blended with the five vowels and practiced in syllable drills: *ma, me, mi, mo, mu*. This is the prescribed method of teaching initial literacy according to the Primary Literacy Framework (2013), and such drills are common practice often heard in schools.

Children are asked to think of words in the language that can be made with the vowels and syllables learnt so far. For example, in Bemba, *umume* ‘dew’; *mama* ‘grandmother’, and so on. In this way, children can see the usefulness of what they are learning, and that they can express themselves in writing in their own language. The practice with syllable, word and sentence formation was also designed to increase the reading fluency of the learners. This programme, therefore, took care of most of the critical component reading skills identified by the [National Reading Panel \(2000\)](#), namely, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and vocabulary. The remaining skill, comprehension, would come later when the children started reading extended texts.

All the individual sounds and syllables in the regional languages are supposed to be covered in the first two years of primary school, so that in Grade 3 the concentration would be on increasing reading fluency. In Grade 4, children should have progressed from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’, that is, using their literacy skills to read content subject matter. However, in most of the primary schools, there is very little grade or age-related reading materials, and much of what they read is what teachers write on the board. This was the case also in the schools in which the study was conducted, though see discussions with teachers on materials further below.

#### **4.1 Purpose of the study**

This was an exploratory study that examined the reading abilities of learners from two contrasting linguistic areas in Northern Zambia. Details of the two areas of focus will be provided further below.

In light of work on multilingual education, as for example discussed by [Benson \(2013\)](#), we conduct this reading test in contrast to how Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) are generally done. EGRAs are usually conducted in a foreign language that is not familiar to learners. As Benson (*ibid.*) advocates, we aim here to contextualise the test in the context of use. Bemba is one of the languages that the learners are exposed to daily, and we use the reading test to gauge to what extent this exposure allows them to effectively engage in this language. We conduct this study under the assumption that literacy in Bemba will both demonstrably improve the learners’ quality of life in their social and cultural context and also provide a better vehicle and indeed also act as a gauge of their literacy capacity in Namwanga and in

their multilingual practices. This is something that an evaluation of literacy ability in English, for example, would not provide, not least because, as noted above, different pedagogical strategies are required for reading of deep versus shallow orthographies. We see this study as speaking to the idea of literacies, and that for these learners this is one of the many literacies that they are on the way to mastering in weaving their language practices in their social space and for their future experiences. We thus conduct this study in full appreciation of the multiplicity of literacies that this context provides. What is missing and which is an aspiration of a future study is to adopt the use of a multilingual text that reflects the translanguaging use of what we treat as distinct languages here—Namwanga and Bemba—but we see the present study as providing a useful initial step in achieving and unpicking a more complex picture. There were two research objectives for this study. The first one was to ascertain whether Namwanga-speaking learners after four years of learning through a regional Zambian language (as a familiar language that is not their MT) would be fluent in reading Bemba and how this compares to the level of Bemba-speaking children with the same text at the same level. The second objective was similar but related to comprehension—how good were Namwanga-speaking learners at reading comprehension after four years of instruction through Bemba as a familiar language and how did this compare to Bemba-speaking children at the same level? These two questions are related in that reading fluency is highly correlated with reading comprehension (Schroeder 2013). We follow Kuhn *et al.*'s (2010) characterisation of reading fluency and how it relates to reading comprehension:

Fluency combines accuracy, automaticity, and oral reading prosody, which, taken together, facilitate the reader's construction of meaning. It is demonstrated during oral reading through ease of word recognition, appropriate pacing, phrasing, and intonation. It is a factor in both oral and silent reading that can limit or support comprehension.

We further take the simple view of reading as proposed by Gough & Tunmer (1986), which states that reading is decoding and linguistic comprehension. We discuss in what follows the context of the study and the methodology adopted.

## 5 Participants

### 5.1 Teachers

Four teachers in total participated in assessing learners. In each school, we recruited a Grade 4 class teacher of the selected class and another Grade 4 teacher present at the time of testing. In each school, we recruited Bemba-speaking teachers.

We selected a Grade 4 class in each school that we found in session. In many primary schools in Zambia, there are up to three sessions in a day when different grades or sometimes different classes of the same grade are in school. When we visited a school and were lucky enough to find a Grade 4 class in session, we picked that for testing. It was thus purely random and opportunistic. We chose to test Grade 4 learners because they are a terminal grade in the current language in education policy: initial literacy instruction ends at this stage as well as the use of the local language as a medium of instruction in content subjects. According to the policy, learners at this stage will have transitioned from learning to read to reading to learn. They would, therefore, be more fluent readers than those in lower grades. Moreover, in the case of the Namwanga children, they would be expected to be proficient in speaking and reading Bemba after four years of instruction through this medium.

## **5.2 Learners**

A total of 60 Grade 4 learners (aged between 9 and 10 years) participated in the study. From each school, we randomly selected 30 learners (15 girls and 15 boys) by picking names from the class register. By doing this, we were able to pick only Namwanga-speaking children for Nakonde and Bemba-speaking children for Kasama by using their surnames, which generally transparently reflect their language or ethnic group/tribe (see footnote 1) and which was further confirmed by the teachers.

## **6 The research sites**

The first research site was Nakonde, a busy border, trading town. The majority of the residents are Namwanga-speaking people who are also found on the Tanzanian side of the border. Namwanga is a central Bantu language classified as M22 in Guthrie's (1967–71) classification of Bantu languages. The number of native speakers of the language was given as 400,000 in the 2010 census (CSO 2012). As an ethnic group, Namwanga constituted 2.8 per cent of the Zambian population (CSO 2012). Related dialects of Namwanga include Iwa, Mambwe, Lambya, Tambo, Lungu and Nyiha. These are sometimes referred to as the Mambwe–Namwanga group of languages. In terms of language vitality, Namwanga can be said to be developing. It is used not only in homes and community but also on the local community radio station in Nakonde. It is also used in churches interchangeably with Bemba. Namwanga people have been in contact with Bemba-speaking people from pre-colonial times, which has resulted in borrowing of words across the two languages. [Kashoki and Mann \(1978: 54\)](#), using a list of some 100 basic words, found a 58 per cent correspondence in vocabulary

between Bemba and Namwanga. This is lower than that between Namwanga and Mambwe at 75 per cent, for example.<sup>3</sup>

In Nakonde town, Bemba is commonly used as a lingua franca among, for example, people who have come from other regions of the country and work at the border or in businesses and government offices. In the trading areas, including those on the Tanzanian side of the border, in addition to Swahili, Namwanga and Bemba are also used.

The second site was Kasama, which is the provincial administrative town for the Northern Province. It is a largely Bemba-speaking town, although there are residents from all regions of the country. Bemba is a central Bantu language classified as M42, which is the most widely spoken language in Zambia at 33.5 per cent in the 2010 census (CSO 2012). When combined with some 20 dialects, the Bemba language group constitutes 41 per cent of the Zambian population. As mentioned earlier, Bemba is one of the seven regional official languages in Zambia.

Apart from the contrasts in the language situation, the schools sampled did not differ from each other in any substantial way, if at all. They were both quite well equipped with enough desks so that no learners were sitting on the floor or were crowded on few desks. However, in both schools we found no reading materials for literacy. The teachers said there were textbooks for some of the content subjects, but we did not observe any such textbooks being used by learners. The enrolment in the Kasama school was slightly higher than that in the Nakonde one, with 63 learners present on the day of the study in Kasama, compared to 52 in the Nakonde school, in the Grade 4 classes tested. The teachers involved in the study in the two schools had very similar teaching experience of over 10 years on average.

## 7 Instruments

### 7.1 Qualitative instruments

Three research instruments were utilised in this study. The first one was an interview guide that was used in the larger ethnographic study with teachers and parents. Its main focus was on the teachers' language practices in school: we asked about the

<sup>3</sup> Grimes (1988) argues that for speakers of two varieties to have mutual intelligibility, they must share at least 85 per cent of their vocabulary. Varieties sharing less than 70 per cent of their vocabulary are too distinct to be considered as part of the same language and those with lexical similarities between 70 to 85 have marginal intelligibility. In this case, Mambwe and Namwanga can be said to be marginally mutually intelligible dialects. In the case of Bemba and Namwanga, following this cut off point, the two can be said to be unrelated languages. However, the sustained contact between the two ethnic groups through generations of Namwanga people who have been exposed to the Bemba language in school as a subject and also exposure to it through mass media, and day-to-day use, the two languages have grown closer or are certainly perceived to be close by speakers.

language or languages the teachers used in teaching in class, with colleagues and with parents. Teachers were also asked to comment on their language preferences and whether they allowed learners to use other languages apart from the official local language of instruction in class. Similarly, for parents, we asked them what languages they normally use at home, how much they were involved in their children's school work, their understanding of the languages used in school and also what their preferences were of which language should be used.

The second instrument was the observation guide, which was used by research assistants to assess whether the school had facilities and materials to support literacy development and also how lessons were conducted, in particular, to observe the teachers and learners' language practices in class. The third instrument was the reading text and comprehension questions, which are discussed below.

## **7.2 Quantitative instrument**

### *7.2.1 Reading text*

The passage used was developed by the researchers; see the text given in (1) below. It was tried out on Grade 4 learners in a non-participating school and found to be suitable. It was short enough to be read in a minute. The passage was a narrative and was on a topic that learners would identify with and thus contextually relevant. In keeping with our adopted ethnographic linguistic approach and the principle of researching multilingually and collaboratively (see [Costley & Reilly 2021](#)), the researchers discussed and agreed with the teachers how to grade learners in terms of reading fluency in Bemba on a five-point Likert type scale.

We followed [Kuhn \*et al.\* \(2010\)](#) above in our interpretation of fluency and reading comprehension. In fluent reading, there is a reflection of syntactic and semantic aspects of the text being read ([Rasinski \*et al.\* 2020: 2](#)). When a child reads expressively, that is, with appropriate intonation and pacing, it shows that she is able to recognise meaningful units of information in the text. In other words, the child is already processing its meaning. Research has shown that reading fluency is associated with reading comprehension ([Rasinski \*et al.\* 2020: \*ibid.\*; Kuhn \*et al.\* 2010](#)). We based the formulation of the five-point Likert scale on this. Thus, a child reading as one would normally speak in the language would score five marks. One not able to read at all would be given a mark of zero. One sounding out letters/syllables and retracting to blend the sounds/syllables would score 1 mark; one able to call out a word at a time would score 2 marks; while one able to put some words in meaningful phrases would score 3 marks; and finally, one able to read with minor pauses would score 4. Scoring didn't include noting down mistakes but was more by an overall impressionistic evaluation. To ensure that there was a high level of agreement between the pairs of teachers

who rated the learners' reading, we made them do some trial runs with a number of students. Inter-rater reliability of their scores was assessed using a two-way mixed consistency average measures Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) in SPSS to assess the consistency of the teacher's ratings of the learners' reading fluency for each school. The resulting ICCs were within the excellent range at 0.95, which showed very high agreement between the pairs of teachers in both schools.

(1) Reading passage

Mutinta aalefwaya ukushita injinga. Asungile ulupiya pa imyeshi isaano. Lilya lwakumanina, aile kumatuuka neensansa mukushita injinga. Pa mwinshi wetuuka asangile banakulubantu abamulombele ulupiya. Bamwebele ukuti umwana wabo aleelwala kukalaale nomba

tabakwete ulupiya lwakwendela. Mutinta aabomfwila uluse abapeelapo ulupiya lwakwe ati: 'Nkeesa shita limbi injinga'.

Translation

*Mutinta wanted to buy a bicycle. She saved money for four months. When it was enough, she very happily went to the shop to buy the bicycle. At the entrance of the shop she found an old lady who asked her for some money. The old lady told her that her child was unwell in the city and she didn't have money to travel to the city. Mutinta felt sorry for her and gave her some of her money and thought: 'I will buy the bike another time'.*

(2) Comprehension questions

1. Cinshi Mutinta aleesungila ulupiya?  
Why was Mutinta saving money?
2. Aleumfwa shaani ilyo ailemukushita injinga?  
*How was she feeling when she went to buy the bike?*
3. Bushe alingile mwituuka?  
*Did she enter the shop?*
4. Nibaani asangile pamwinshi wetuuka?  
*Who did she find at the entrance of the shop?*
5. Mutinta muntu wamusango nshi?
  - a. Wacilumba
  - b. Wacikuku
  - c. Wabutani
  - d. Wansansa

*What kind of a person is Mutinta?*

  - a. *She is proud*
  - b. *She is compassionate/warm hearted*
  - c. *She is stingy*
  - d. *She is a happy person*

### 7.2.2 Comprehension tests

As illustrated above in (2), the passage had five questions, four of which were self-response type of questions, split equally between ones based on explicitly stated

information in the passage and others that required learners to make straightforward inferences. The fifth question required interpretation and integration of information; thus, the questions were presented in order of difficulty. The goal of the questions varying in level of difficulty was to discriminate between weak and strong comprehenders.

### 7.2.3 Procedure

The test was conducted in a quiet, empty classroom where two teachers sat at a table and learners came to sit across the table one by one. The learner was told to read the text aloud as best they could. Those who were unable to read within a minute after a number of prompts were asked to leave the room. The teachers wrote down separately a score for the reading fluency part. After reading, the text was taken away from the learner and then one of the teachers read the questions out slowly. The learner answered the questions orally. In some cases, the teacher had to repeat a question if the learner appeared not to have heard it properly. Each teacher had to indicate a mark for each correct answer. The answers had been agreed upon by the researchers and the teachers beforehand. After completing the assessment, the child was thanked for participating.

## 8 Findings

### 8.1 Reading fluency results

The first research question was whether Namwanga learners learning through a second Bantu language, Bemba, would be as fluent as Bemba-speaking children learning through their first language/mother tongue. [Table 1](#) shows mean scores in the reading test contrasting gender and school location.

These results show that in both schools, girls performed slightly better than boys, and this is even more so in the Kasama school. The performance in reading showed that Nakonde learners ( $M=2.9$ ,  $SE=.21$ ) were slightly better than those in Kasama ( $M=2.3$ ,  $SE=.27$ ). However, the above results were not statistically significantly different  $t(58)=-1.62$ ,  $p>.05$ .

We assessed the inter-rater reliability using a two-way mixed consistency average measures of ICC to assess the degree of consistency of the teacher's ratings of learners' reading in the two schools. The resulting ICCs were within the excellent range for each pair of teachers in the two schools. For Nakonde it was 0.944 and for Kasama slightly higher at 0.980.<sup>4</sup> This was almost perfect agreement between the pairs of teachers in the two schools.

<sup>4</sup> Inter-rater reliability of less than 0.4 is classified as poor; 0.41 to 0.59 fair; 0.6 to .74 as good and 0.75 to 1 as excellent (Cicchetti, 1994).

**Table 1.** Comparison of mean reading performance between Kasama (Bemba speaking) and Nakonde (Namwanga speaking).

<i>Gender</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Marks (average out of 5)</i>
Boys (N=15)	Kasama	1.87
Girls (N=15)	Kasama	2.80
Total	Kasama	2.3 SE=.27
Boys (N=15)	Nakonde	2.83
Girls (N=15)	Nakonde	2.93
Total	Nakonde	2.9 SE=.21

## 8.2 Reading comprehension

The second research question asked whether Namwanga-speaking learners who had been learning through a familiar language (Bemba) would perform as well as Bemba-speaking learners learning in their MT, in reading comprehension. Table 2 below gives the mean scores of learners in the two schools segregated according to gender, and the total mean scores are shown below each school location. The picture is similar to the one for reading fluency; girls were slightly better than boys in both schools, especially in the Kasama school. In reading comprehension, again Nakonde learners ( $M=3.7$ ;  $SE=.23$ ) performed slightly better than Kasama learners ( $M=3.0$ ;  $SE=.36$ ), but this difference was not statistically significant  $t(58)=-1.63$ ,  $p>.05$ .

We were also interested in seeing whether in these two schools, there was a relationship between learners' performance in reading fluency and reading comprehension as argued in Kuhn, Schwanenflugel and Meisinger (2010). There was indeed a significant relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension in both cases at  $r=.91$ ,  $p<0.01$  for Kasama and  $r=.67$   $p<0.01$  for Nakonde.

## 9 Classroom observations and teacher/parent interviews

In order to better contextualise and understand the learning environment in which the learners tested were immersed and provide a context for the discussion of the results, we provide here some discussion of how learning occurred and was delivered in the classroom by considering some findings from classroom observations. In addition, we also discuss some interview findings from teachers and parents that show the kind of attitudes and ideologies on language and, in particular, on media of instruction from these two important players in the students' learning environment.

**Table 2.** Reading comprehension results.

<i>Gender</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Marks (average out of 5)</i>
Boys (N=15)	Kasama	2.53
Girls (N=15)	Kasama	3.47
Total (N=30)	Kasama	3.0, SE=.36
Boys (N=15)	Nakonde	3.46
Girls (N=15)	Nakonde	3.93
Total (N=30)	Nakonde	3.7, SE=.23

This provides us with some important insights into some of the students' lived experiences. The data reported for teachers was conducted in the two schools but also as part of the wider study, similar observations and interviews were conducted in other schools in the two linguistic areas. We note here that we are yet to complete data analysis of all the data collected as part of the larger study to provide more robust trends and in this sense the attitudes discussed here cannot at present be deemed to be representative of the whole data set. We here thus provide an impression of some of the views that came up consistently in the data so far analysed and leave a more detailed analysis to future publications. The same applies to the data from interviews with parents. Nevertheless, in all cases the views reported here were raised multiple times.

### 9.1 Teachers' classroom practices and interviews

Most teachers reported that they used Bemba in teaching and with colleagues and parents. In addition, they also used English with colleagues and in staff meetings. Some teachers in the Namwanga area said they switched into Namwanga to explain difficult concepts or clarify points when this was deemed necessary. In class, some said they allowed learners to use Namwanga in the early stages e.g. in Grade 1. Teachers explained that grade ones have difficulties when they first start school because of the change in language from the home language, Namwanga, to the language of instruction, Bemba. But the teachers felt that the learners appear to learn Bemba very rapidly within a few weeks and are completely fluent within a year, and they argued that the best time to learn a new language is when the learners are still young. Teachers' views on learners' initial competencies can be seen in Extract 1 below and on the support they offer learners by using Namwanga in Extract 2 below from a focus group discussion with teachers.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In all extracts, the words in italics in the Namwanga text indicate the speaker's use of English words.

Extract 1, from ZN 02 Te INT 050320 (2) JM:

[T:... Baleesa ne cinmwanga ceka ceka mu *first week*. Nomba by the time twile tulesambila icibemba bele baleba *used nabena*. But ilya *first na second week* kulabafye limbi cilia ulelanda tabacishibe pantu baliba *used* ne cinamwanga.

... *They come with only Namwanga in the first week. But as they go on learning, they get used to Bemba. But in the first and second week sometimes they don't understand what you are saying because they are used to Namwanga.*

Extract 2, from ZN Te FG Te Re300320 JM:

[T1: Ee nga namona taleecita *understand* limo tuleesa mukubomfyako icinamwanga. Namweba. Nangu uo wamona ukuti ici taleeumfwa pantu bambi tababomfyako nangu icibemba pa ng'anda [T2: nga bantu bapalamina uku (pointing in direction of the border) ne ciswaili)] ... cinamwanga, so nga wamona ukuti taleecita *understand* wa bomfyako icinamwanga.

*When I notice that they don't understand, sometimes I use Namwanga. I tell them. Or anyone you notice that they don't understand because some don't use any Bemba at home [T2: Like people living near this area (pointing in the direction of the Tanzanian border) and Swahili] it is only Namwanga, so when you notice they don't understand you use Namwanga.*

In another interview [ZN INT Te Re 020320JM], a deputy head teacher expressed the same, pointing out that when Bemba was used in early years, this can create a 'language barrier' with children who do not speak Bemba as they are unable to answer questions asked in Bemba. Although the deputy head teacher acknowledged that teachers were encouraged to use both Namwanga and Bemba in the early years and certainly in the first grade, he also expressed that there was variation in how much this was implemented and it mainly depended on a teachers' preference and leniency in the classroom.

Some teachers—principally Bemba speakers—said they understood Namwanga but could not speak it and in this case only spoke in Bemba in the classroom even if they allowed students to speak in Namwanga. Teachers who came from other language groups (Tonga, Bisa, Nyanja) had managed to learn Bemba but only basic Namwanga and so could only use Bemba in teaching.

In terms of reading, interviews with teachers and learners showed that there was little reading outside of class and there were not many reading materials in school or in homes. Teachers did report that there were textbooks available that could be used in school. The main practice observed, though, and also discussed with teachers is that they wrote sentences and words on the board that learners could read and also copy into their books to practice reading at home. In discussing whether Bemba should be used to teach literacy and reading, most teachers were happy to adopt Bemba, saying they had seen positive results of reading skills learnt in Bemba being used for English; see Extract 3 below. One teacher, though, in evaluating the success and progress of learning reading, regarded having only 10 children who could read well in her Grade 3 class of up to 70 pupils as doing well.

Extract 3, from ZN Te FG Te Re300320 JM:

[T: Ine palwandi kuti namona caaliba fye bwino pantu umwana nga acita *break* mu ciBemba aishiba bwino bwino ne cisungu balesa mukwishiba bwangu tabashupikwa pantu balesha ukulapashanyako filya fine ifyo alebelenga mucibemba; babelenga icisungu mucibemba baleeshako panoono nomba kuti mwanona kwati balefilwa *pronunciation* ... Nga acitafye *break* mu ciBemba nefya cisungu aleeshako panoono. *Then* apo bateacher beshila mukubomba ni pali *pronunciation* nga baba *introduced* ku cisungu.

*In my opinion I think it is good because when a child breaks (through) in Bemba, and knows it very well they also learn English quickly. They don't have problems because they compare how they read; they read English in Bemba although you would think they fail to pronounce. ... When they break (through) in Bemba even in English they try (to read). Then the teacher has to work on the pronunciation when they are introduced to English.*

Classroom observations in Nakonde (Namwanga-speaking area) showed that in all grades learners usually conversed in Namwanga among themselves but mainly answered teachers' questions in Bemba. In two classes observed, learners conducted a group discussion in Namwanga, but the learner who went to present to the whole class used Bemba. Outside the classroom, the language of play was largely Namwanga. In one class, the teacher asked learners to tell a story and one student did so in Namwanga. The teacher continued the class and discussed the story told in Namwanga and asked the pupils questions about it in Bemba, without translating any of the Namwanga as she confidently correctly assumed that the learners had fully understood. However, the teacher herself did not speak in Namwanga and when learners responded in Namwanga the teacher repeated the response in Bemba. See part of this interaction in Extract 4 below. The story the student told was about a hare who was lazy and did not do any work. The languages used are given in brackets, showing the teachers' continued use and recasting of responses in Bemba, despite allowing the use of Namwanga in the classroom. The teacher also ends this section with positive reinforcement 'you are all clever', showing that she does not treat the use of Namwanga in the classroom negatively.

Extract 4, from ZN INT Te Re 020320JM:

Teacher: Ati kalulu. Acitenshi? [Bemba]

*He says hare. What did the hare do?*

Pupil 1: Akuwomba ncito [Namwanga]

*He worked*

Teacher: Ati alebomba incite ... [Bemba]

*That he worked*

Pupil 2: Vwi ... vwile e kalulu a siomba ncito [Namwanga]

*I have heard that/understood that the Hare did not do any work*

Teacher: Ati atila, bayini, kalulu taleebomba inciito? Okay mwalicenjela bonse. [Bemba]

*He has said [the learner who answered in Namwanga], do you agree, that the Hare did not do any work? Okay. You are all clever.*

Thus, while teachers appreciated the difficulty that children faced when they first entered school and faced Bemba in contrast to predominantly speaking Namwanga at home, they felt that overall, the use of Bemba was acceptable as they learnt the language quite quickly, likely also aided by the similarity in grammatical structure. They also offered some scaffolding for students by allowing them to use Namwanga in the early years. An important issue in relation to teachers is also that some did not speak Namwanga and although they reported to have good understanding of the language, they were not themselves in this case able to use Namwanga in the classroom. In most cases as above, even when Namwanga was allowed and students were not reprimanded for using it, the teacher themselves did not speak in Namwanga, which could be a way of continuing to signal the official language of instruction. Conversations with pupils in focus groups revealed that they used Namwanga among themselves and at home, but in addition, they also used some Bemba in the community. Students did not view the use of Bemba in the classroom negatively and said they could understand.

## 9.2 Parent interviews

Interviews with parents were conducted in Nakonde in the neighbourhoods of the schools where the study was conducted, so that parents who were interviewed had children who went to local schools. Generally, parents had lived in the area for extensive periods, and some were born in the area. Selection followed a snowballing pattern and was dependent on availability and willingness to participate. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant who was fluent in both Namwanga and Bemba and took the structure of a guided conversation that also included some general conversation about the area.

Parents reported that the language used at home and in daily interactions such as at markets, in shops and at church was Namwanga. They also reported that they also used Namwanga at PTA (Parent–Teacher Association) meetings in schools. They reported that they understand that their children learn in Namwanga, Bemba and English when they are in school. When asked whether they thought their children understood what was taught in Bemba and English, some parents expressed that they think in this case children do not understand well, while others thought they could understand because they learn that different languages are used in different contexts:

Extract 5, from ZMPNS2-IntPaRe-040320MM:

Pa: eeh tukuti tuti muwufupi tukupusana, ndiwafuma walembe iciwemba koko ni cizungu, koo tukulandavye icinamwanga ampela so ukuzana ngawa ti alembe atandi asimpe andi alande icinamwanga.

Pa: yes, we can say that, in short [it] differs, ... they learn and write in Bemba and English at school, here at home we just speak Namwanga that's all, so you find that they do not write but instead only speak Namwanga.

We asked parents to consider what language they thought would be optimal for children to learn in, in school and found that parents overwhelmingly preferred Namwanga (Extracts 6–8):<sup>6</sup>

Extract 6, from ZMPNS3-IntPaRe-040320-MM:

Pa: Ninga zumilizya ukuti wa wonvya icinamwanga. ... Eta, amuno mumwitu muwinamwanga.

*Pa: I would suggest that they use Namwanga ... because this is a Namwanga-speaking area.*

Extract 7, from ZMPNS2-IntPaRe-040320MM:

Pa: koo tunga sola ici Namwanga nye amuno nga twati tuti iciwemba awikala kaya awinamwanga wa tupunye. ... aco nga wiza we mwani mpaka ulande ici namwanga.

MM: vyo wa Tembo wiza koo wasanguka awinamwanga asawawemba.

Pa: eeh wasanguka awinamwanga.

*Pa: here we can choose Namwanga because if we say Bemba, the people living here will not like it as here we are all Namwangs. ... Even if you come as a visitor you have to speak Namwanga.*

*MM: so people who are called Tembo (and hence come from the Eastern Province) they come and become/must speak Namwanga and not Bemba?*

*Pa: yes precisely, they become Namwanga.*

Extract 8, from ZMPNS2-IntPaRe-040320MM:

Pa: ... Pamwi cino nandi nkolowozye apa mulandu wakuti ngawakusambilila icizungu ici Namwanga wakupotwa so nga twati lemba kalata wakupotwa ...

*Pa: ... Maybe I can add something about the issue of children learning in English at school, they have difficulty with Namwanga so when you ask them to write a letter in Namwanga they are unable to do so.*

In the above quote, the parent was expressing his displeasure of the fact that children do not learn Namwanga at school and are thus unable to write even a letter in it. In other words, the education gained in school does not appear to be relevant to the lives of children in the community, from the parents' perspective.

In terms of parents helping children with homework that is given in Bemba, some parents said that they found it easy to help the children with this also when it was in Bemba, otherwise if homework is in English and a parent can't help, then they rely on older siblings to offer support to younger ones. Asked further how they manage to help children with homework when it is in Bemba, given their saying that they only use Namwanga at home and in most activities, this was one of the responses in Namwanga:

<sup>6</sup> A reviewer points out that this positive attitude of parents to a smaller local language is different from that reported in most other African countries/contexts. Perhaps in this case it is due to the settled multilingual use of language, where both languages are deemed as a standard part of the local linguistic repertoires but at the same time with some understood contextual delineations. It could also be that the linguistic ethnographic methodology with the focus groups adopting a supportive and local nature and also being conducted in Namwanga better created a context for free and unregulated expression.

Extract 9, from ZMPNS2-IntPaRe-040320MM:

Pa: ah tukakonkaye but nke tukakonka co walemvile mu ciwemba but canga cipepuke nga wasambililanga icinamwanga elo wazana ni cinamwanga ku ng'anda.

*Pa: well, we just follow what they have written in Bemba but it would be much easier if they learnt in Namwanga since they speak Namwanga at home.*

Thus, overall, parents were very keen for their children to learn in the language they use at home, as they considered that to be most useful. There was little acknowledgement that there was also use of Bemba in the community, which the parents must also interact with, with parents' perceptions closely tied to identity and cultural practice.

## 10 Discussion

The results from the short reading and comprehension study conducted shows that the learners using Bemba as a familiar language and those using it as a MT in the same town setting do not show a statistically significant difference in performance. The performance of all learners shows that they perform better on comprehension than on reading but also, as these are Grade 4 learners, their performance is expected to be better and around the mark 4, also for a relatively easy text such as this. The results are particularly unexpected for the learners whose MT is the language of instruction; the reason for this is not immediately clear to us, and we can only speculate that it may be to do with the relatively small sample. The teachers' rating of the learners' performance, although subjective, showed an acceptable level of reliability, and so this cannot be the reason for the differing performance.

The results showing that the learners whose first language is Namwanga and who learn through a familiar language, Bemba, perform on a par with those who learn through their mother tongue lead us to investigate further the status of the 'familiar' language. In this case, it is a language that is structurally similar to Namwanga and with a lexical similarity of 58 per cent, and above all is a language that is also used outside the classroom and is heard in the learner's wider community as regional language and lingua franca. It is worth pointing out that in the 2010 census in Zambia (CSO 2012), 38.9 per cent of Mambwe–Namwanga speakers reported using Bemba as their main language of communication. In addition, as a bustling trade town, the environment also has a regular influx of travellers who are likely to speak the lingua franca. Although a number of activities can be argued to take place in Namwanga, at least for the settled town dwellers, there is also the presence of Bemba on many radio programmes, for example. In this sense, Bemba is on a different footing from a foreign language, like English or French, that predominantly exist outside the community. To capture this contrast, Benson (2013) also distinguishes languages which learners are exposed to in the environment versus those to which they are not exposed to and

which are, as such, classified as foreign. Recall that the teachers in fact reported that children were able to begin to use Bemba fluently quite quickly. Although the languages are marginally similar, we must assume that the accelerated pace of speaking Bemba is because for these learners they encounter this language in their environment. The learners themselves also reported not having much difficulty with Bemba and even expressed a preference to learn in Bemba, although we treat these responses with caution as they are not quantified and may also reflect what the learners perceived to be the expected response. Under these conditions, the results show that languages which learners are exposed to, because they are part of their immediate environment, *can* moderately successfully be used as mediums of instruction. There are, though, a number of crucial elements that make this possible. Firstly, as we saw from the classroom observations, learners were free to use Namwanga in the classroom and were not discouraged if they gave responses in Namwanga. This shows that teachers were to a large extent building on and exploiting the language resources that the learners brought to the classroom by allowing Namwanga to also be a language of the classroom and not only a home and an at play language. We consider this use of Namwanga in the classroom to be by far the most important factor. The free use of Namwanga also shows learners that their mother tongue is valued, which is important for their own identity and motivation and fosters a spirit of free expression in the classroom. Secondly, Bemba was not a totally foreign language to the learners, and although it was the medium of instruction, in most classes it did not pose a threat to the learners' mother tongue, which could also be used. As a familiar language, it was easier for learners to develop semi-automatic skills in reading also because comprehension in Bemba could be aided by the moderate lexical similarity with the mother tongue. Finally, it appears that the learners managed to navigate the different uses of their languages in a meaningful way that allowed an equitable negotiation of power between languages inside and outside the classroom. This has parallels with findings in [Spernes & Ruto-Korir \(2018\)](#) in their study on language preferences in rural Kenya, where learners varied in language preference and their own perceived competence in the four skills between the home language Nandi, the regional and national language Kiswahili and English. Their preferences were based on five contexts of use: (i) communicating with family; (ii) communicating with friends; (iii) use at school; (iv) importance for culture; and (v) communicating with everyone. This textured use of languages is typical of multilingual contexts and correlates to different literacies where each serves a purpose and meaning in the lives of learners and users. As long as no value judgement is added to this stratification, a healthy intermingling of languages in different and across contexts can co-exist.

A concerning matter, though, with the results for both groups of learners is the overall poor performance in reading at Grade 4, when learners would have been expected to have acquired full reading fluency in the familiar language or MT by

Grade 3. Since students start learning English oral skills in Grade 2 and then literacy in English in Grade 3, it is likely that this complicates the learning situation for them and hinders their progress.<sup>7</sup> This kind of short-term transitional model, where learners must quickly shift to another, usually foreign, language as MOI fails to fully exploit the benefits of the familiar or first language of the learners.<sup>8</sup> As Mwansa (2017) has shown in another study on reading skills in Lusaka schools, students showed regression in their Zambian language literacy skills when English was introduced too quickly, such that ground that had been gained in learning reading was then subsequently lost. We would thus argue that it is important that the skills in initial literacy are significantly strengthened before they begin to be built upon; otherwise, it may lead to literacy in English having to be taught from scratch with no benefits accrued from previous learning based on the familiar or MT language. If the transition period is too short, it will result in poor retention of skills already learnt. What is needed in such cases, as Benson (2013) suggests, is continuing literacy in the familiar language or MT even when the foreign language is introduced. A further important point that the findings raise in relation to there being no real difference in performance between the learners who used a familiar language and those who used the MT is that in fact more use of Namwanga in the classroom should be encouraged and also for learning literacy, since this will put students at even more of an advantage and remove any initial delay and difficulty no matter how short, especially in this current situation where they will also have to transition into English. The fewer the obstacles the learner faces, the higher the chance of effective learning. We would assume that the skills learnt in the MT, particularly in relation to automaticity in decoding and fluency would be more long-lasting and better able to be available for literacy in English when this starts.

Another important factor is the wider applicability of the findings. As discussed earlier and assumed throughout the discussion, literacy-learning pedagogies have to be adapted and adjusted to the learning context. We think that our findings are unique to this town-setting context where the familiar language is widely used in the immediate environment and community. This, we think, would contrast with a more rural setting where the regional language was not familiar in being within the learners' daily discourse. It remains to be seen in future research whether this assumption is borne out,

<sup>7</sup> The current education policy's aim is that children would transfer their literacy skills from Zambian languages to English. However, Mwansa (2017) observes that the initial skills in Zambian languages are not currently being exploited to teach English literacy because all the sounds corresponding to the Roman alphabet are reintroduced, including those already familiar to children, rather than merely concentrating on new sounds. Needless to say, this causes confusion for children who must then assume they are learning all new sounds.

<sup>8</sup> There is also a lack of transfer of skills from the familiar language to the MT, since parents report that children cannot write in Namwanga and yet they can in very similarly structured Bemba. There are missed opportunities to exploit resources and learning in both directions that can be leveraged.

but we take it that the familiarity of the MOI, coupled with the use of Namwanga in the classroom, is what acts as a vehicle enhancing the development of semi-automatic reading fluency in Bemba.

## 11 Conclusion

Although some positive results have been achieved for some learners with the use of a familiar language in learning literacy, there are many aspects of the process and context that need to hold for this to be successful. A crucial issue in this regard is that while a number of teachers did not discourage the use of Namwanga in the classroom, practice was essentially haphazard and dependent on a teacher's preferences, as noted by one deputy head teacher, who comments on how systematic the use of Namwanga is. He says it is good practice for overcoming language barriers in the classroom, however: 'nomba nga asanga *teacher monster* palaba *distance sana ninshi*', 'if *slhe (the student)* finds a monster of a teacher, this creates a big distance (between the teacher and the student)' that is a barrier to learning.

The 'monster teachers' the deputy head refers to here are those teachers who discourage the use of Namwanga in class and who are not willing to use this familiar language with the learners to help them bridge gaps in their understanding of content. Both types of teachers do exist in the Zambian context: those willing to use the children's familiar language to facilitate learning, even if this means investing their time and effort in learning the language; and those who are insensitive to the communicative needs and challenges their learners face in using a second Bantu language. There is no readily available data about the performance of these learners in the education system.

It is an open secret that the decision to offer initial literacy instruction in Zambian languages was, first and foremost, to provide a strong foundation on which to build literacy skills in English (MOE 2013; MOE 1996). The idea of providing additive bilingual education, which was also claimed as one of the aims of the 2013 policy (MOE 2013: 5), has not been borne out because Zambian languages are not used beyond Grade 4 as media of instruction in any content subjects, nor are they used in the end of primary school leaving examinations as qualifying subjects. It would appear, therefore, that these languages only serve as tools for acquiring literacy and language skills in English. It is, therefore, not necessary to discourage the use of any other familiar Zambian language that can facilitate the acquisition of initial literacy skills. Where teachers are capable of providing effective instruction in a language other than the seven regional languages, this should be encouraged; after all, Zambian languages are Bantu languages with very similar grammatical structures. It is these similar structures that can be exploited to facilitate the learning of multiple Zambian languages in the predominantly multilingual context of the country.

We thus end with some emerging patterns which, if further substantiated, provide the basis for recommendations to be considered in other multilingual learning contexts where a familiar language other than the MT may have to be used for a wide range of reasons, not least of which is resources in low-income countries, as well as political motivations.

- ⇒ All languages ‘outside’ and which are part of the language repertoires of learners, be they familiar languages or MTs, should be brought inside the classroom to enhance classroom experiences
- ⇒ Curriculums should embed multi-literacies for the different purposes of use that languages in multilingual communities have
- ⇒ Multilingual practices in classrooms should not be left to chance and teacher preference but should be embedded in policy and supported in teacher training
- ⇒ Continuing literacy in the familiar language or MT should be maintained throughout primary school to facilitate better transitions into foreign language literacy
- ⇒ Leverage the high literacy skills of teachers to learn local literacies to better embed them in classrooms, aided by strategies to do so, developed in their teacher training
- ⇒ As also noted in Mwansa (2017), teachers have to be materials developers, creating stories and texts that foster the development of literacy and supplements the oral culture at home
- ⇒ Consider the support, scaffolding and strategies needed for teaching academic content in this approach (e.g. use of bilingual glossaries)
- ⇒ Exploit teachers’ own linguistic repertoires to de-stigmatise the use of multiple languages in the classroom
- ⇒ Consider and take into account the specific contextual support that is needed to ensure effective learning
- ⇒ Consider whether assessment of language competencies on entry into school can play a role in influencing practice.

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To cite the article: Kula, N.C. & Mwansa, J. (2022), 'Learning Literacy in a Familiar Language: Comparing Reading and Comprehension Competence in Bemba in Two Contrasting Settings in Northern Zambia', *Journal of the British Academy*, 10(s4): 97–124.

<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/010s4.097>

*Journal of the British Academy* (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by  
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH  
[www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk](http://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk)