

Teaching of English as a Second Language in Zambian Secondary Schools: Challenges and Suggested Solutions

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this research were to identify the challenges of teaching English as a Second Language in Zambian Secondary Schools and offer some practical suggestions for improvements. To achieve its objectives, this paper adopted a desk review approach. Data was gathered from published reports, online materials, articles, thesis and dissertations. Thereafter, it was reviewed, analyzed and synthesized so as to gain insights on challenges and solutions to ESL teaching. The findings indicated poor learner performance in national examinations, low English Language proficiency among learners, inadequate teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher training for multilingual education, language policy implementation challenges, low learner classroom participation, low learner confidence in English, poor learner attendance to classes, limited parental support and insufficient use of communicative teaching approaches. Despite all these challenges, this research provided the following suggestions for improving ESL teaching: reflective teaching, inductions, home-school collaborations, recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity in classrooms, giving explicit learner objectives and giving multiple specific instructional strategies. This paper recommended thorough examination of the following factors before selection and application of a given suggestion: availability of resources, time, teacher qualification, teacher experiences, teacher motivation, learner motivation and teacher-learner cultural background.

Key words: English as a Second Language, teaching, teacher, challenges, suggestions

BACKGROUND

Zambia is a sovereign state geographically located on the southern part of the African continent with 8(eight) neighbouring countries namely; Botswana, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya, Mozambique, Angola, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is a multilingual state with arguably 73 languages doted across its 10 provinces namely; Lusaka, Muchinga, Southern, Northern, North-Western, Eastern, Luapula, Copperbelt, Central and Western. Zambia has an estimated population of about 18.6 million people. Its capital city is Lusaka and the official language is English. With an official status, English is used in all spheres of government operations such as business, commerce, trade, administration, education and politics. It is also a crucial determinant for economic and social mobility (Moyo and Mwanza, 2025).

From 1964 when Zambia got its independence up until now, English has been taught as a Second Language and used as a medium of instruction from Grade one to tertiary level (M.O.E 2023). However its teaching particularly in secondary schools has been far from being straight forward. Many scholars have brought out a number of persistent challenges such as: poor learner performance in national examinations, low English Language proficiency among learners, inadequate teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher training for multilingual education, language policy implementation challenges, low learner classroom participation, low learner confidence in English, poor learner attendance to classes, limited parental support and insufficient use of communicative teaching approaches(Chishipula, 2016;Mwanza, 2019; Moyo and Mwanza, 2025; Clare and Mwanza, 2025;)

With the above systemic challenges the search for more efficient methodologies and practices within the Zambian classroom space for ESL Teaching becomes eminent. This research therefore, endeavored to identify the common challenges faced by teachers of ESL and offer practical suggestions for improvement.

Statement of The Problem

A lot of literature exposes so many challenges associated with ESL teaching in Zambia such as; poor learner performance in national examinations, low English Language proficiency among learners, inadequate teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher training for multilingual education, language policy implementation challenges, low learner classroom participation, low learner confidence in English, poor learner attendance to classes, limited parental support and insufficient use of communicative teaching approaches. However there is very little literature which provide suggestions for improvement with regard to classroom practice

Research Objectives

1. To identify common challenges faced by teachers of ESL in Zambian Secondary Schools.
2. To suggest solutions for improvement of ESL teaching in Zambian Secondary Schools.

Research Questions

1. What are the common challenges that teachers face when teaching ESL in Zambian Secondary Schools?
2. What are the suggested solutions for improvement of ESL teaching in Zambian Secondary Schools?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper engaged a desk research approach. Published reports, articles, online resources, thesis and dissertations both local and international were reviewed. Data collected from these materials was then analyzed and synthesized so as to gain valuable insights with regards to ESL teaching challenges and practical suggestions for improvements.

The Historical Development of Esl Teaching Methods

Mwanza (2016) discoursed that Grammar-Translation practices were among the earliest forms of teaching ESL as they emerged between the 1840s and 1880s through the works of German scholars such as Karl Plotz, Johann Meidinger and Johann Seidenstrucker. These practices encouraged studying language through the analysis of detailed grammatical rules and the translation of sentences into and out of the target language (Richard & Rodgers, 2006). However, such classroom practices were later discouraged as they paid much attention to grammatical rules and ignored context and correct pronunciations. As a result of these weaknesses the Direct Method emerged. In this method, teaching begins with dialogue using a modern conversation style in the target language. New material must be introduced orally with accompanying actions and pictures. This material should be presented in the target language and the mother tongue is never used. The teacher is advised to teach only everyday vocabulary and sentences (Richards & Rodgers, 1995). One of the major weaknesses of the Direct Method is overreliance on teachers' skills. The implication on classroom practice is the direct transfer of teacher's weaknesses to the learners. Such shortcomings with the Direct Methods brought dissatisfactions among researchers, practitioners and policy makers in learning institution. To mitigate the observed challenges another method called the Audio-lingual was developed. This method emerged in the USA around the 1940s and 1950s for the development of foreign language teaching programmes. In audio-lingual classrooms, the teacher uses repetitive drills to teach grammatical sentence structures or patterns. Mimicry and memorization characterize the teaching of phrases. Correct responses are immediately reinforced while wrong sentences are immediately discouraged. The emphasis is on having learners produce error-free utterances (Richards and Rodgers, 1995). In the Zambian context, such classroom practices are not encouraged by the Ministry of education. However, they are still being practised by some teachers as they perceive them to be effective when teaching ESL (Mwanza,

2016). The implication of this behaviour by some teachers is that government policies regarding improvement of ESL teaching may fail due to non-compliance by some teachers. From the Audio-lingual method, there came a shift to the Cognitive Code Method which was pioneered by cognitive psychologists (Demirezen, 2014) as a reaction against the Audio-lingual Method. These scholars claimed that language teaching and learning was a mental process which involved the consciousness of both the teacher and the learner. They advised that ESL teachers must engage in meaningful learning activities which will help learners understand the rules and gain conscious control of grammatical, lexical and auditory patterns. The major weakness of such practices is the little use of authentic language materials. The cognitive code approach is widely practised in the Zambian context (Phiri 2021; Mwanza 2016). However, the non-application of authentic materials in the language learning process is in contradiction with the recommendations that the Ministry of Education in Zambia made for classroom transactions (M.O.E 2013 and M.O.E 2023). The argument that the ministry expresses is that it is only authentic material which prepares learners for real-life situations.

After the Cognitive Code Method of language teaching emerged the Situational Language Teaching Method in 1960. This was as a result of dissatisfaction with Communicative and Cognitive Code language teaching methodologies. In a situational language teaching classroom, the teacher is advised to consider the culture of the people when teaching language. Language items are to be taught in line with everyday life situations (Mumba 2019). Such practices obtain in Zambian secondary school classrooms because teachers perceive them as a way of proving the relevance of taught material to everyday life. The major weakness of such practices is the failure to account for the unpredictability of everyday language use (Mwanza, 2016).

Communicative Language Teaching Method followed the Situational Language Teaching Method and was advocated by David Wilkins, Keith Johnsons and William Littlewoods who were dissatisfied with the Audio-lingual and Grammar Translation ESL practices (Richards & Rodgers, 2006). In a Communicative Language Teaching classroom, the learner is put at the centre of all activities. This learner must be taught to communicate competently in all real-life situations. The teacher is encouraged to ignore errors that do not interfere with communication between or among learners. All learning and speaking activities are focussed on the exchange of messages that a hearer understands and wishes to convey. The teacher is also encouraged to take an integrated approach when teaching skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. In the Zambian context, such practices are prevailing in ESL classrooms as confirmed by Munakape(2005) and Nyimbili (2017) and supported by the Ministry of Education (2013)

More recently developed methods are the Text-Based Integrated Approach and Eclectic Methods. Text based entail the teacher structuring his or her lessons around several texts. These texts must be appropriate for the grade level and be able to engage learners in a creative and thought-provoking way. With these texts, a teacher should be able to expose learners to a variety of language use and cover as many topics as possible such as vocabulary, grammar composition, comprehension and summary (Mumba, 2019). Mumba further adds that such practices are prevailing in the Zambian context even though punctuated with misconceptions due to a lack of adequate knowledge on the part of the teachers.

Mwanza (2016) stated that eclecticism in ESL teaching means a combination of different practices which are informed by different methods to teach given language items. A teacher can practice eclecticism in two ways. Firstly, he or she can combine related practices from different methods. This is called principled eclecticism. Secondly, he or she may combine unrelated practices from different methods. This is referred to as unprincipled eclecticism. Mwanza (2016) argues that eclecticism obtains in Zambian classrooms. Unprincipled eclecticism is more practiced than principled eclecticism due to inadequate knowledge on the part of the teachers.

Of all the practices discussed above, the direct method and the grammar-translation methods are the least practiced in the Zambian ESL classrooms at the secondary level.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON METHODS AND APPROACHES IN ZAMIA

In Zambia, so many studies have been done on English as a Second Language. The focus, however, has been more on teaching methods/approaches and challenges than suggestions on improvements. Mwanza (2016)

conducted a study on critical reflection on eclecticism in the teaching of English grammar in selected Zambian secondary schools in Central province. His study employed a mixed-method design involving 90 teachers and 18 lecturers. The study revealed that teachers had inadequate knowledge about eclecticism. From this study, it can be seen that the focus was just on English grammar. It must be mentioned at this juncture that grammar is not the only component of ESL. There are other components such as comprehension, composition, listening and speaking.

Mwelwa and Mwanza (2020) conducted a study to analyse teachers' classroom strategies aimed at developing communicative competency in learners in Nakonde District. Twenty (20) teachers from four secondary schools were observed and interviewed orally. The findings from this study had shown that teachers used several strategies such as group discussions, oral presentations and teacher simulation, brainstorming and context-based storytelling. The teachers used the mentioned strategies because of the available resources. The study under discussion investigated the communicative competence of learners within ESL. However, there was need to investigate the linguistic competence of the learners as well so as to gain an all-round understanding of ESL teaching in this context.

Mumba (2019) conducted a study to establish teachers' application of a Text-Based Integrated approach in the teaching of the English language to Grade eleven pupils in selected secondary schools of the Luanshya District. This study employed a mixed-method approach. The sample size involved fifty-four (54) teachers. The findings indicated implementation challenges such as teachers failing to apply the approach despite the training. While the study by Mumba (2019) reported teachers failing to implement a text-based approach despite training, it did not probe the cognitive aspect which can be encapsulated as lived experiences. Therefore, insights into lived experiences of ESL teachers may help explain their failure to implement the text-based approach.

Ng'ona (2016) conducted a study which aimed at establishing the factors contributing to poor performance in English composition writing in grade 12 in secondary schools in the Kabwe District. It was a case study involving 160 pupils and 8 teachers from 8 schools. Lesson observations and tests were used to collect data. The findings indicated that teachers lacked the necessary skills to teach compositions. However, this study did not investigate further to find out why teachers lacked composition teaching skills despite undergoing training. The weakness of this study was its methodology. Observations alone are not enough to draw conclusions from. This study should have included interviews. This would have provided insights into the classroom decisions and judgements made by the teachers.

Sifuniso (2015) investigated the implementation of reflective teaching methods in the teaching of English in Livingstone in the Southern Province of Zambia. He adopted a descriptive survey design using classroom observations, interviews and questionnaires to gather data. The findings revealed that teachers used different forms such as role play, mentoring, diaries and mind mapping. They chose the aforementioned due to insufficient materials.

Nyimbili (2017) conducted a study on the use of learner-centred techniques in the teaching of ESL in Lundazi District in the Eastern Province of Zambia. He adopted a mixed-method approach using focus group discussions and questionnaires to gather data. The findings indicated the use of debate, field trips, quizzes, role play and drama as techniques used by teachers. It must be mentioned that from this study it can be seen that there are various techniques for implementing a learner-centred methodology.

Chishipula (2015) also did a study on the implementation of the communicative language teaching approach in public secondary schools of Chongwe District, Lusaka Province. His findings recorded misconceptions of the method, inadequate pre-service teacher training and negative attitudes towards the method. The weakness of this study is that it did not investigate the kind of training the teachers went through and the reasons for their negative attitude towards the approach.

Phiri (2021) conducted a study on the influence of teacher cognition in the teaching and testing of English grammar in selected secondary schools of the Luanshya District. She adopted a qualitative design. Classroom observations, interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. The findings of this study indicated that teachers understood grammar as rules of the English language, taught grammar deductively, and engaged in

rule explanation and frequent error correction. The findings had further shown that teachers tested grammar using written exercises such as transformation and fill-in-the-blanks. Lastly, teachers learnt grammar explicitly from their past experiences. The study by Phiri (2021) adopted a descriptive design. The weakness of a descriptive design is that it does not give enough time to explore a phenomenon in detail. Secondly, Phiri (2021)

Literature Review On Challenges

Like any other subject, the teaching of English as a second language in Zambia has been far from being straightforward. In this section, several studies that highlighted the challenges that ESL teachers faced in Zambian secondary schools were reviewed.

Mwanza (2016) conducted a study on the implementation of the eclectic approach in the teaching of ESL grammar. He reported several challenges such as a shortage of teachers, inadequate infrastructure, lack of teaching materials, poor reading proficiency among learners and overcrowded classrooms. He further reported that teachers perceived the eclectic approach as time-consuming. Teachers also failed to provide the context within which they taught their grammatical concepts to learners. These challenges imply that the teaching of ESL becomes unbearable on the part of the teachers. The learners will be put in a position where they will be failing to understand concepts and view the whole process of learning as not real because the teachers are failing to provide meaningful context.

A study by Nyimbiri (2017) on the implementation of learner-centred strategies in ESL classrooms reported the following challenges; over-enrolment causing teachers to use teacher-centred methods, and failure by teachers to design learner-centred activities due to a shortage of teaching materials. This study also reported that teachers strictly adhered to the syllabus. The implication of these findings to the teaching of ESL in secondary schools is that no meaningful learning can take place where the classes are overcrowded and there are no teaching materials.

Mumba (2019), in his study of the implementation of the text-based integrated approach in ESL classrooms, reported the following hindrances; lack of teaching materials, poor foundation in the English language, low reading levels and lack of self-motivation to learn. The implication of these challenges in the teaching of ESL is that teachers will have to motivate learners to learn ESL before any meaningful learning can take place. However, this may be time-consuming on the part of both teachers and learners. Secondly, a poor foundation in English may force the teacher to go back to teaching basics at the expense of other more advanced components.

Munakape (2005) reported resistance to curriculum changes as a challenge to implementing a communicative language teaching approach in ESL classrooms. The implication of this resistance to the teaching of ESL is that well meaningful curriculum changes for effective teaching may be rejected, and as result, secondary schools in Zambia may not be at par with the ever-changing global village. Another challenge was highlighted by Bayani (2013) who talked about government and private-owned institutions of learning. He stated that there was a lack of monitoring on the part of the government when it came to private secondary schools and colleges. They executed their teaching and learning in an unsupervised manner. This situation does not mean well for ESL teaching. If the private schools are left unmonitored and unsupervised, the quality of teaching and learning may be compromised in privately owned institutions.

Chishipula (2015) reported also that ESL teachers faced challenges in implementing a communicative language teaching approach. In her study, it was revealed that there were low English proficiency levels on the part of both the teachers and the learners. Furthermore, poor training, insufficient teaching resources, large classes and lack of financial support were among the challenges. The low English proficiency of teachers has implications for the teaching of ESL. If teachers themselves are failing to speak ESL proficiently, they may not be expected to competently teach the learners. Lack of finances may also hamper the procurement of ESL teaching and learning materials.

In 2015, Mulenga conducted a study, investigating the challenges which hindered the designing of the English language teacher education curriculum at the University of Zambia. His findings indicated that there was a mismatch between what the students learnt and the needs of secondary schools. The students failed to translate

the theoretical knowledge into the practical realities of the classroom. The university has for a long time continued producing inadequately prepared teachers of the English language.

From the review of the above studies, it can be noticed that there are so many challenges that must be dealt with in the teaching of ESL in Zambian secondary schools. If the situation continues the performance of learners in ESL may continue being poor and in return affect the development of the country. Challenges such as teachers failing to put theory into practice; resistance to curriculum change, failure to provide context for teaching; and poor training may be as a result of government policies and training programmes which do not put into consideration the lived experiences of teachers. It is as a result of the above given challenges which this paper endeavored to offer alternative solutions on effective teaching of ESL

Suggestions On Effective Teaching of Esl

So many scholars have suggested different ways of how ESL can be taught effectively. Moon (1999) proposed reflective teaching. He explained that it is a way of teaching in which the teacher begins the process of teaching by moving from the first experience to observation and concretisation, and later on to experimentation and assimilation. From this assertion, it is clear to see that teacher experiences must be a priority. They form an initial step in the whole teaching process. In the Zambian context, reflective teaching is being practised by some secondary teachers of ESL in the Southern Province (Sifuniso, 2015). The method is used due to insufficient language teaching materials in some schools. The implication is that where materials are enough it may not be preferred. Brining (2015) argued that a prescriptive curriculum may be a hindrance to this kind of teaching.

However, in the Zambian context, the issue of a prescriptive curriculum does not arise because the education system is guided by a competence-based curriculum which is descriptive in nature. Furthermore, the Zambian secondary English syllabus recommends teaching ESL using communicative language teaching methods and a text-based integrated approach. This syllabus does not mention reflective teaching whether directly or indirectly. In this case, a suggestion to adopt the widespread use of reflective teaching may be received with mixed feelings given that it has no policy backing. Research into teachers lived experiences would provide insight into how best reflective teaching methods may be adopted and applied in the Zambian context. Secondly,

Brining (2015) suggested that another way of effectively teaching ESL was by giving teachers the freedom to experiment with new methods, models and techniques. While this suggestion may work in other situations, in the Zambian context it may not be feasible. In the Zambia educational system, there is one curriculum for ESL which is followed by all the secondary schools in all the provinces. From this curriculum, a common syllabus is drawn. In Districts, schools are advised to formulate common schemes of work. Furthermore, there is a stipulated time within which the ESL syllabus must be completed. For the junior secondary it is two years whereas for the senior secondary it is three years after which learners must sit for Examinations (2013). Therefore, such policy demands may make it difficult for the above suggestion to work within the Zambian context. In addition, classroom freedom may seem to be good, but too much of it may compromise the quality of what is taught. Hammond (2020) added that this kind of liberty which is usually implemented through classroom discussions tends to stray learners away from the centre of focus of what must be taught. Therefore, there should be boundaries within which this freedom should be exercised. Hall (2011) suggested induction as another way of enhancing ESL teaching, especially on the part of newly deployed teachers. He explained that institutions of learning must hold introductory talks and workshops to help the new teachers cope with expectations. Impey and Underhill (1994) in Brining 2015 explained that newly qualified ESL teachers must have a reduced timetable, be regularly observed and plan their lessons together with more experienced teachers as their mentors. While this appears to be a good way of helping novice ESL teachers, Banja and Mulenga (2015) commented that it is not valued by countries like Zambia. What prevails is a situation they called 'sink or swim' where the novice teachers must alone find ways and meanings of integrating into the system without any form of induction. Furthermore, these novice teachers are given the same workloads as those experienced teachers. They are rarely observed and mentored. It must be noted that induction can be a platform on which senior ESL teachers may share their lived experiences about ESL teaching and learning with novice teachers. This may help them to have an idea of what it means to be an ESL teacher even though experiences vary. In addition, Correll (2016) explained that ESL teachers must recognise and affirm the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners, incorporate their

native languages and build collaborative relationships with their families. In the Zambian context, this suggestion may be cardinal. Zambia is a multilingual nation implying that both ESL teachers and learners have diverse linguistic backgrounds (Mwanza, 2016). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education advocates for strong home-school partnerships intended for language development. A challenge, however, may arise when an ESL teacher perceives this diversity of backgrounds as a hindrance to teaching/ learning. On the contrary, it must be viewed as an advantage as it provides a rich linguistic repertoire to draw from during teaching and learning. This strategy of teaching ESL may cement the position of personal cultural and linguistic understanding of both teachers and learners within the learning and teaching systems.

August and Shanahan (2006) suggested the following as effective ways of teaching ESL: explicit learner objectives, authentic learning context, and engaging and motivating activities. From the suggestions given, it can be deciphered that if a teacher is to teach ESL effectively, he or she must plainly explain from the onset, what is expected from the learners at each stage and what must be achieved at the end of the lesson. This enables both the teacher and the learners to have a clear vision of the lesson. Secondly, an authentic context and engaging classroom activities may give learners a sense of understanding that what they are learning also applies in other environments including their own. Activities give learners a sense of being part and parcel of the learning process. In addition, certain concepts can be retaught to ensure consolidation and classroom discussions can be promoted so that all the questions and concerns of the teachers and the learners can be brought to light. The suggestions raised in the above discussions are also supported by the Zambian education system. For example, the communicative language teaching methodology that the English language senior secondary syllabus recommends promotes the use of authentic materials and engaging classroom tasks (M.O.E., 2013 and M.O.E 2025). However, all these suggestions may not be applied given some challenges that some schools face such as overcrowded classes and lack of teaching materials (Mumba 2019; Chishipula 2015). If the aforementioned are to be achieved, manageable classes, enough teaching materials and considerable time are advised. Echevaria and Vogt (2010) suggested that teachers of ESL should engage in multiple specific instructional strategies for supporting language development. August and Shanahan (2006) espoused direct instructions such as vocabulary and comprehension. Correnel (2016) also talked about the need for classroom instructions that promote joint productivity in classroom activities where students can be grouped according to their interests and language usage. She further stated that instructions must give learners opportunities to practice reading, writing and speaking. The use of the native language and English during learning is to be promoted as well. Instructions should also support complex thinking and give learners more time for conversations. In the Zambian context what has been suggested above can be encapsulated as learner-centred learning. This kind of learning where learners are at the centre of learning is what the government has been advocating for through the recommendation of the communicative language teaching methodology (M.O.E 2023). In this methodology language tasks that engage complex thinking and practice are highly emphasized.

In light of the above discussions, it can be concluded that there are several ways in which teachers may enhance the teaching of ESL. These conclusions are in line with the 2023 Curriculum Framework which suggests use of several teaching techniques and methods even if it does not mention which ones in particular. However; it should be noted that successful implementation of the suggestions given is context specific. This means that what may work in one school may not work in another due to contextual factors such as time, availability of resources, teacher qualifications, experience and motivation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this discourse has shown that ESL teaching within the Zambian context is not an easy undertaking given the many challenges faced such as; poor learner performance in national examinations, low English Language proficiency among learners, inadequate teaching and learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, limited teacher training for multilingual education, language policy implementation challenges, low learner classroom participation, low learner confidence in English, poor learner attendance to classes, limited parental support and insufficient use of communicative teaching approaches. Despite all these challenges, the paper provides the following suggestions which may improve ESL teaching: reflective teaching, inductions, home-school collaborations, recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity in classrooms, giving explicit learner objectives and giving multiple specific instructional strategies. It should be noted that what is key in all these

suggestion is the context of application (teacher and pupil motivation, availability of material and time, place teacher experience and qualification). Due to this premise some may work and some may note.

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