

Management of the Growth of the Chinese Language Education in Zambia through the Confucius Institute: Marks on the Road

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.12120069>

Received: 13 December 2025; Accepted: 20 December 2025; Published: 06 January 2026

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade Chinese language education in Zambia expanded rapidly, largely because of the establishment and growth of the Confucius Institute at the University of Zambia (CIUNZA). As China deepened its economic, political and cultural ties with Zambia, Mandarin emerged as an important linguistic resource for academic mobility, employment and cross-cultural communication. Despite this expansion, empirical evidence remained limited on the drivers of growth, learner motivations, and operational lessons from CIUNZA's programmes. This study examined the management, status and outcomes of Mandarin education in Zambia to produce context-specific guidance for policy and programme improvement. Zambia's language policy environment further complicates implementation, as policies prioritize mother tongue instruction in early grades while interest in foreign languages continues to rise. A convergent mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data were collected via structured surveys of CIUNZA learners and alumni and were analysed with descriptive statistics in SPSS to identify trends in motivations, perceptions and programme reach. Qualitative data comprised semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with Zambian and Chinese instructors, CIUNZA administrators, Ministry officials and selected employers; these data were analysed thematically to surface institutional, pedagogical and sociocultural dynamics. Findings from both strands were integrated during interpretation. Three interrelated drivers explained Mandarin's growth: (1) strategic institutional expansion led by CIUNZA's teaching centres, (2) strong instrumental and integrative learner motivations with over 80% of surveyed learners cited employment, scholarships or career mobility as primary motives, and (3) supportive sociopolitical relations between Zambia and China. Key challenges included limited numbers of locally trained Mandarin teachers, a shortage of Zambia-contextualised teaching materials, uneven curriculum integration across education levels, and continued dependence on external funding and expertise. Stakeholders called for increased local ownership, curriculum localisation and stronger alignment with national education policy. This sentiment extended to institutional investment, where 56.7% strongly supported the idea that Zambia should develop its own Mandarin teaching infrastructure. Mandarin education in Zambia has, however, achieved notable reach and relevance, but its long-term sustainability requires strengthened management structures, systematic teacher development, and policies that balance external support with national educational priorities. The study recommends investment in Zambian teacher training pathways, production of Zambia specific Mandarin materials, formal integration of Mandarin within language policy frameworks, and improved monitoring and evaluation of learner outcomes to secure sustainable growth.

Keywords: Mandarin education, Confucius Institute, CIUNZA, Zambia, language policy, teacher training, mixed methods

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in communication, identity, and global engagement, making it a key focus of this study on the growth of Chinese language education in Zambia. Globally, language learning reflects shifting political and economic influence, with Mandarin expanding rapidly alongside China's rising global presence. In Zambia, a highly multilingual country with 73 indigenous languages, English remains dominant, spoken by about 18.8% of the world's population, while Mandarin accounts for 13.8% native speakers and continues to grow among more than 100 million second-language learners (Ethnologue, 2023). These global patterns show how language reflects shifts in political and economic influence. For Zambia, home to 73 indigenous languages and English as the official medium (Heugh, 2019). The introduction of high-demand foreign languages like Mandarin offers potential benefits for cognitive development, educational access, and global competitiveness.

Research on multilingual education shows that linguistic diversity can improve learning outcomes, yet Zambia continues to face significant challenges such as high dropout rates and shortages of teaching resources. Research in multilingual education has long shown that linguistic diversity improves learning outcomes. UNESCO (2025) reports that mother-tongue instruction can increase literacy by 30% and reduce dropout rates by half. Within this context, understanding how Mandarin education aligns with national education priorities is essential. The spread of Mandarin is closely linked to China's soft power strategy through Confucius Institutes, and Zambia's Confucius Institute at The University of Zambia (UNZA) has expanded significantly, paralleling growing economic ties between the two countries. Despite this growth, there has been limited empirical evaluation of whether Mandarin programmes meet labour market needs, learner aspirations, or institutional capacity.

Zambia's language policy environment further complicates implementation, as policies prioritize mother tongue instruction in early grades while interest in foreign languages continues to rise. Mandarin's expansion also reflects broader debates about the role of foreign languages in national development, particularly as Chinese investment increases demand for Mandarin skills in key economic sectors. However, rapid programme growth has raised concerns about sustainability, including shortages of qualified teachers, limited learning materials, and reliance on external support.

The global spread of Mandarin is also tied to China's expanding soft-power influence. Confucius Institutes have become central to this effort, linking language teaching with cultural exchange and international cooperation. Since 2004, more than 530 institutes and 1,100 classrooms have been established in 162 countries, including 61 institutes across 46 African nations (Li, 2021). Zambia's Confucius Institute at UNZA, opened in 2010, has grown to 19 teaching centers and has trained over 20,000 learners by 2024 (CIUNZA, 2024; Xinhua, 2025). This educational expansion parallels deepening economic ties: bilateral trade reached USD 5.88 billion in 2022, about 500 Chinese firms operate in Zambia, and the Chinese population has increased significantly (ZDA, 2023; Brautigam, 2020). Yet no empirical study has examined whether Mandarin programs respond to Zambia's labor market needs, learner expectations, or institutional capacity. By grounding this study in institutional, learner centered, and policy perspectives, the research offers insights that can help manage Mandarin's growth in a way that strengthens rather than strains Zambia's education system.

Statement of the problem

Despite Zambia's long-standing orientation toward English as the official language and the predominance of Bemba, Nyanja, Tonga, and Lozi in everyday communication, the rapid expansion of Chinese language education through the Confucius Institute (CI) marked a significant shift in the country's linguistic and educational landscape. Since its establishment at the University of Zambia (UNZA) in 2010, CI has trained over 5,000 learners by 2020 (Xinhua, 2020), reflecting deepening China–Zambia cooperation in trade, infrastructure, and diplomacy (King, 2013; Li, 2016). However, this growth occurred without a corresponding evaluation of its management, relevance to national educational priorities, or long-term sustainability.

Despite increasing demand, several systemic challenges persisted. Mandarin remained insufficiently integrated into Zambia's national curriculum, institutional capacity was limited, and dependence on Chinese instructors and externally supplied teaching materials created vulnerabilities in programme continuity. Concerns were also raised regarding academic autonomy, with scholars cautioning that Confucius Institutes, while promoting cultural exchange, may influence curriculum content and restrict critical engagement with cultural narratives (Hartig, 2015; Hanban, 2019). These issues highlighted uncertainty about how Mandarin aligned with Zambia's linguistic sovereignty and educational direction.

Despite these issues, little empirical research existed on how Chinese language education was being managed, what motivated Zambian learners to pursue Mandarin, or what lessons could be drawn from a decade of implementation. This knowledge gap made it necessary to investigate the institutional, sociocultural, and policy dimensions of Mandarin education to ensure that its growth meaningfully supports Zambia's educational and development goals rather than creating new disparities or dependencies.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the current status of Chinese language education in Zambia.
2. To identify key lessons learned from the implementation and growth of Chinese language education in Zambia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEWED LITERATURE

This study was guided by three interrelated theoretical frameworks Soft Power Theory Cultural Globalization Theory, and Diffusion of Innovations Theory each offering a distinct analytical lens for understanding the growth and management of Chinese language education in Zambia through the Confucius Institute.

Soft Power Theory (Nye, 2004) provided a foundation for interpreting China's promotion of Mandarin as an instrument of attraction rather than coercion. This theory helped explain why many learners voluntarily take up Mandarin due to perceived socio-economic and cultural benefits. In this way, Soft Power Theory enabled the study to assess whether Zambia's growing interest in Mandarin represents genuine attraction or strategic accommodation shaped by China's diplomatic engagement.

Cultural Globalization Theory (Appadurai, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999) frames the spread of Mandarin as part of broader global cultural flows in which languages linked to economic opportunity gain symbolic and practical value. This theory helped contextualize Zambian learners' motivations such as aspirations for international scholarships, employment mobility, and cultural exchange within global shifts that elevate Mandarin as a language of development and modernity. It further brought attention to the asymmetric nature of cultural exchange, where China remains the dominant cultural exporter. This allowed the study to evaluate whether Mandarin education promotes mutual exchange or reinforces one directional globalization.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003) explained the introduction and spread of Mandarin in Zambia as an innovation moving through stages of awareness, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. The theory highlighted key innovation attributes such as Mandarin's perceived relative advantage such as employment, scholarships, compatibility with learners' aspirations, and complexity arising from linguistic difficulty that shape adoption. The theory helped analyze why Mandarin adoption varies across individuals and what structural conditions support or hinder its sustainability.

A critical review of the global literature reveals that although studies such as Maksimova (2022), Chan (2022), and Cai (2019) document the worldwide expansion of Chinese language education and the Confucius Institute system, the methodological approaches used are predominantly descriptive, cross-sectional, and policy analytical. These studies primarily track institutional growth number of Confucius Institutes, enrollment figures, and frequency of cultural events yet they offer limited empirical evaluations of language proficiency outcomes, learner retention, or pedagogical effectiveness across diverse educational contexts. For instance, Maksimova (2022) reports increases in digital learning engagement but does not assess long-term learner performance, while Chan's (2022) scoping review highlights participation statistics without examining learner progression. These global studies therefore reveal a broad research gap: the absence of longitudinal, outcome-focused, and learner centred empirical evidence capable of explaining whether expansion translates into sustained linguistic competence or meaningful educational benefit.

Across Asian, European, and Middle Eastern contexts, studies by Wen (2022), Hong (2021), Putri et al. (2024), Khan and Ahmed (2023), and Somchai and Li (2023) consistently emphasize the role of intrinsic and instrumental motivation in learning Mandarin. However, these studies rely heavily on short-term survey-based methodologies that foreground motivational correlates rather than causative mechanisms. While they quantify motivational categories (e.g., Hong's correlation between Ideal L2 Self and effort, or Khan and Ahmed's 70% economically motivated learners), they provide limited insight into how these motivations evolve over time, how they interact with social class, gender, or institutional factors, or how motivation predicts actual language attainment. Many authors such as Wen (2022) and Putri et al. (2024) explicitly acknowledge the absence of longitudinal, mixed-method, or socio-economically differentiated studies. As a result, the literature shows a persistent gap concerning the dynamic, context-sensitive processes through which motivations shape long-term Mandarin learning trajectories.

Regionally, African studies including Usman (2019), Mbugua and Iraki (2022), Oduor (2021), and Nkrumah (2024) demonstrate growing institutional and student interest in Mandarin, driven by China-Africa cooperation. However, these studies are largely descriptive case analyses that document institutional partnerships, learner attitudes, and cultural engagement, yet fall short of evaluating learning outcomes, curriculum relevance, or the socio-economic returns of Mandarin proficiency. For example, Mbugua and Iraki (2022) identify intrinsic cultural motivation among Kenyan learners but do not examine learner performance or post-study opportunities. Similarly, Nkrumah's (2024) evaluation of the Confucius Institute in Ghana highlights perceived proficiency gains without applying standardized proficiency testing. Across these African

contexts, a significant research gap concerns the absence of rigorous assessment of the pedagogical quality, sustainability, and labour-market value of Mandarin programmes on the continent.

With respect to Zambia, the existing literature—such as Phiri et al. (2022), Chansa (2021), Kangwa (2023), Zhong et al. (2021), Mwenda (2023), Tembo and Lungu (2022), and Mubanga (2022) provides important insights into institutional constraints, learner motivation, and the role of CIUNZA. Yet the Zambian scholarship is particularly constrained by methodological and empirical limitations. First, most studies adopt cross-sectional designs that describe current attitudes, infrastructural challenges, or policy misalignments but do not track learner development, program outcomes, or long-term socio-economic effects. For instance, Phiri et al. (2022) and Siame and Mubemba (2020) highlight resource inadequacies but do not evaluate their impact on learner achievement. Second, motivational studies such as Mwenda (2023) and Tembo and Lungu (2022) document learner aspirations but fail to link motivation with measurable proficiency or educational performance. Third, although Zhong et al. (2021) reveal important ideological tensions between learners and teachers, they do not extend this analysis to assess how such tensions affect classroom practices or learning outcomes. Collectively, Zambian studies lack longitudinal, proficiency-based, and policy-integrated analyses that can robustly explain how Mandarin programmes function and what outcomes they produce.

Additionally, across all levels global, regional, and local there is a consistent under-examination of teacher preparedness, curriculum localization, classroom pedagogy, and assessment systems. Studies such as Kangwa (2023), Mutolwa (2019), Li et al. (2016), and Liu (2013) highlight teacher shortages, limited CPD, and reliance on imported teaching materials, yet none provide empirical evaluations of teaching effectiveness, classroom practices, or the suitability of Chinese textbooks in multilingual African contexts. The literature also reveals a near absence of research on how Mandarin instruction interacts with Zambia's multilingual classrooms, despite the findings of Simachenya and Mambwe (2023) showing the importance of translanguaging in language learning. Furthermore, there is no comprehensive research on how Mandarin could be integrated into Zambia's national language policy framework, a gap made evident by the historical policy analysis of Chishiba and Manchishi (2016), which highlights the absence of a structured third-language policy.

Another significant gap concerns the socio-economic and labour-market outcomes associated with learning Mandarin. Studies such as Mubanga (2022) claim that Mandarin skills improve employability, and Kunda and Tembo (2022) report limited sustainability of programmes, but there is no systematic analysis comparing graduate outcomes, income changes, employment pathways, or industry demand for Mandarin skills. The literature also lacks empirical evaluation of the broader socio-cultural implications of China–Zambia linguistic engagement, including issues of identity, cultural negotiation, and power dynamics—an omission particularly relevant given the teacher skepticism documented by Zhong et al. (2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analyzed independently yet during the same phase, and then merged during interpretation, to capture both measurable trends and in-depth perspectives on the growth of Chinese language education in Zambia (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The population included CIUNZA students, Zambian and Chinese instructors and administrators from the Ministry of Education. From this population, a sample was selected using purposive sampling for instructors and administrators, whereas convenience sampling for students who were available during the study period.

The quantitative component of the study involved a sample of 344 respondents, which was sufficient to generalize findings to the wider population of Mandarin learners in Zambia at a 95% confidence level and a $\pm 5\%$ margin of error. Stratified sampling was used to ensure proportional representation across key learner characteristics, including level of study, gender, age, and institutional site, thereby strengthening the reliability of comparisons across subgroups.

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct experience and relevance to the study objectives. In addition, two focus group discussions were conducted with current Mandarin learners, involving approximately 20–25 students per group, to capture diverse learner experiences and motivations. Together, these participants provided in-depth insights into the institutional, pedagogical, and learner dimensions of Chinese language education in Zambia.

Data were collected through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The questionnaires provided quantitative insights into learner motivations, perceptions, and experiences, while the interviews and discussions generated qualitative data on institutional management, policy alignment, and sociocultural influences. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Factors contributing to the current status of Chinese language education in Zambia

A descriptive analysis was done to establish the level of agreement from the respondents. The majority of the respondents agreed that the presence of the Confucius Institute had increased access to Chinese language education, with $n = 7$ (23.3%) agreeing and $n = 16$ (53.3%) strongly agreeing, while only a small proportion disagreed ($n=2$ (6.7%). Similarly, the availability of scholarships to study in China was perceived as a major incentive for learning Mandarin, with $n = 7$ (23.3%) agreeing and $n = 14$ (46.7%) strongly agreeing, although a minority expressed disagreement $n = 5$ (16.6%). Government support was also viewed as influential, with $n = 5$ (16.7%) agreeing and $n = 11$ (36.7%) strongly agreeing, despite some respondents indicating disagreement $n = 9$ (30.0%).

The expansion of Chinese investment in Zambia further emerged as an important driver, as $n = 8$ (26.7%) agreed and $n = 17$ (56.7%) strongly agreed that Mandarin had become a valuable skill in the local labour market. Regarding affordability, responses were more varied, with $n = 10$ (33.3%) remaining neutral and smaller groups strongly disagreeing $n = 6$ (20.0%) or agreeing $n = 8$ (26.7%). The adequacy of learning materials showed similar variation, with nearly half of the respondents reporting neutrality ($n=14$, 46.7%) and a combined 36.6% ($n=11$) expressing disagreement. Conversely, perceptions of instructor quality were generally positive, as 40.0% ($n=12$) agreed and 13.3% ($n=4$) strongly agreed that Chinese instructors were well qualified and effective.

Table 4.2: Factors contributing to the current status of Chinese language education %

Expressions	SD	D	N	A	SA
The presence of the Confucius Institute has increased access to Chinese language education in Zambia.	0.0	6.7	16.7	23.3	53.3
The availability of scholarships to study in China has encouraged more students to learn Mandarin.	3.3	13.3	13.3	23.3	46.7
Government support has played a significant role in promoting Chinese language education.	10.0	20.0	16.7	16.7	36.7
The growth of Chinese investment in Zambia has made Mandarin a valuable skill.	0.0	3.3	13.3	26.7	56.7
Chinese language courses are affordable for most students.	20.0	3.3	33.3	26.7	16.7
There are sufficient learning materials and resources for Chinese language education.	13.3	23.3	46.7	16.7	0.0
The Chinese instructors are well-qualified and effective.	3.3	13.3	30.0	40.0	13.3

Source: Field findings 2025

The qualitative findings indicate that Chinese language education in Zambia has grown significantly due to a combination of social, economic, political, and cultural influences. Economic factors emerged strongly as drivers of the current status of Mandarin education. Students consistently acknowledged the presence of numerous Chinese-owned factories, construction firms, and investment projects as contributing to demand for Mandarin proficiency. As Respondent 12 explained, “*There are a lot of Chinese people building factories in Zambia, resulting in many opportunities.*” Rising job opportunities, business partnerships, and the increased presence of Chinese enterprises have therefore positioned Mandarin as a relevant and strategic skill.

Political and diplomatic relations between China and Zambia have also amplified the prominence of Chinese language programmes. Respondents highlighted the strengthening bilateral relationship, with one participant noting that cultural events and diplomatic collaboration have “*increased the tight relationships between*

Zambia and China” (Respondent 10). Participants cited policies encouraging Chinese language instruction in public schools, as well as scholarship and exchange opportunities sponsored by China. As Respondent 14 stated, *“The government announced that all public schools should teach Chinese language from primary to Grade 12.”*

Culturally, students expressed interest in cultural exchange and appreciating Chinese traditions, which have contributed to the rising appeal of Mandarin. Students described the Institute as a cultural and academic bridge, with Respondent 2 stating that it *“acts as a link between Zambia and China and promotes Mandarin.”* However, some respondents felt that outreach efforts, particularly through digital platforms, remain limited.

The Ministry of Education reported that Zambia currently offers four foreign languages French, Portuguese, Chinese, and Swahili alongside Zambian Sign Language. Among these, French is the most established foreign language, having been introduced in 1954 and currently offered in over 100 schools across the country. In comparison, Chinese remains at a pilot stage, with instruction currently limited to 10 government schools. The Ministry official highlighted the ongoing plans for expansion by saying:

“We have four languages: French, Portuguese, Chinese and Swahili. French was introduced in 1954... Chinese is just about in 10 government schools and we are thinking of rolling it out to other schools so that it can be incorporated into the new curriculum.”

The positive reception of Chinese language education by learners, parents, and educational institutions has been identified as a key factor contributing to its gradual growth. The Ministry noted that stakeholders have generally viewed Mandarin as a valuable addition to the curriculum, appreciating both its academic and practical benefits. As the respondent emphasized by saying,

“I can affirm that it has been received with very positive perceptions from the learners and parents. It has been looked at as a good subject for their learners.”

This enthusiasm suggests that the initial pilot programmes have successfully generated interest and engagement, laying a foundation for potential future expansion.

An important component of the programme’s implementation has been the support provided by the Confucius Institute at the University of Zambia (CIUNZA). CIUNZA has played an essential role in delivering instruction, training teachers, and assisting with curriculum implementation in the pilot schools. Given that the Zambian government does not currently employ Mandarin teachers directly, the institute’s contribution has been central to maintaining programme continuity and quality. The Ministry highlighted this support, stating:

“We do not have teachers on the Zambian payroll; CIUNZA is the one helping in the 10 schools where we are piloting these programs. We have Chinese volunteers, and now the Zambian teachers have been incorporated, but still, they are not employed by our government.”

Stakeholder engagement was described as mixed. While cooperation between UNZA and Chinese partners was described as strong, collaboration with the Ministry of Education was said to be improving but limited by resource constraints. Respondent 4 explained that *“universities and Chinese partners are quite active, but coordination with the government is still slow, especially in areas like teacher recruitment and curriculum standardization.”*

Overall, these findings reveal that the current status of Chinese language education in Zambia is shaped by a convergence of institutional, socio-economic, political, and cultural factors, consistent with global and African trends documented in scholarly literature. Quantitatively, the study shows overwhelming agreement that the Confucius Institute’s presence has increased access to Mandarin instruction, with 76.6% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing. This aligns with the international evidence that Confucius Institutes serve as the primary institutional mechanism for expanding Mandarin education worldwide (Starr, 2009 & Cai, 2019) as well as Zambia specific data indicating that CIUNZA has trained more than 20,000 learners since 2010 (CIUNZA Reports 2024). The positive perception of instructor qualifications among respondents further mirrors global studies such as Smith and Chen (2019) which show the centrality of native speaking Chinese teachers and structured instructional support provided by CIs.

The findings further unveil an important issue widely revealed in the literature that while demand for Mandarin is increasing, the pace of expansion remains constrained by policy gaps, inadequate local teacher supply, and inconsistent curriculum localization. This matches conclusions from a study done by Bodomo, Mboya, &

Nkrumah (2024) which argues that sustainable growth requires stronger national frameworks and contextualized pedagogical approaches.

Lessons from Zambia's experience with Chinese language education

The qualitative findings revealed several important lessons regarding the delivery, management, and sustainability of Chinese language education in Zambia, particularly as implemented through the CIUNZA. Participants highlighted that Mandarin learning largely occurs within the classroom, with limited opportunities to practice the language in real-life contexts. As Respondent 12 noted, *"Here at UNZA, we only speak it in class,"* indicating that learners perceive a need for more immersive and practical learning environments where they can apply their skills beyond formal lessons.

Another significant lesson concerns the language barrier between learners and some instructors. Students reported challenges in understanding lectures when Chinese instructors had limited proficiency in English. Respondent 11 remarked, *"Chinese teachers need to learn how to speak English; it is easier to deliver to learners and understand."* This suggests that effective pedagogical preparation, including language support for instructors, is critical to ensuring that students can fully grasp the content and achieve learning outcomes.

Another key lesson relates to the system's dependence on volunteer teachers from China, which has created recurring disruptions. The Ministry explained that some schools have been unable to sustain teaching when volunteers leave, as was the case during COVID-19. According to the respondent, *"some schools that had enrolled for Chinese language examination at Grade 9... were not able to sit for those exams because the volunteer teachers left... and could not come back."*

This experience revealed the need to develop local capacity, with the Ministry stressing that *"we need sustenance by having Zambian-Chinese teachers."* Encouragingly, the Confucius Institute has recognized this gap and introduced in-service training for Zambian teachers, a development the Ministry described positively stating that,

"Confucius has realized this gap... They have come up with a deliberate initiative of training in-service teachers... there is light at the end of the tunnel."

Overall, these findings from this study reveal several key lessons about the evolution, management, and sustainability of Chinese language education in Zambia, consistent with comparative evidence from global and African contexts. Quantitatively, perceptions of institutional effectiveness showed mixed sentiment, with only 40.0% agreeing that the Confucius Institute (CI) was effectively managed, while an equal proportion expressed neutrality or disagreement. This aligns with broader critiques identified in global literature, which caution that although CIs expand access to Mandarin, variations in coordination, governance, and teacher placement often affect programme consistency (Starr, 2009; Lahtinen, 2015). Similar concerns have been documented in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, where management inconsistencies have shaped public perceptions of CI-led programmes (Mbugua & Iraki, 2022).

From a policy perspective, Ministry insights show systemic lessons, including the persistent lack of locally produced teaching materials, a challenge also cited in other African countries where imported textbooks fail to reflect local realities (Bodoma, Mboya & Nkrumah, 2024). The absence of Zambian-generated learning content limits contextualization and reinforces dependency on foreign-developed curricula. The Ministry's acknowledgment that foreign language instruction currently begins only at secondary school reflects structural limitations that inhibit early proficiency development, contradicting best practices observed in countries where foreign language acquisition begins in early childhood education.

Clearly, the lessons from Zambia's experience indicate substantial progress in cultural exchange, learner enthusiasm, and perceived relevance of Mandarin, but also reveal structural and pedagogical challenges that must be addressed for sustainable growth. The evidence indicates that long-term success would require developing local Mandarin teachers, creating contextualized teaching materials, enhancing institutional coordination, improving pedagogical training for instructors and strengthening policy frameworks to support continuity and national ownership.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Chinese language education has become an increasingly significant part of Zambia's educational and economic landscape, driven by strong learner demand and expanding institutional presence through CIUNZA. While Mandarin instruction has grown rapidly across universities, secondary schools, and

community centres, this expansion has occurred alongside persistent structural weaknesses, including limited local teaching capacity, inadequate learning resources, and the absence of a clear national policy framework for foreign language integration.

Key lessons from Zambia's experience indicate that sustainable growth in Mandarin education requires stronger institutional coordination, curriculum localization, and increased national ownership. Teacher preparation and continuous professional development emerged as critical gaps, while community engagement needs to move beyond symbolic cultural events toward sustained, locally embedded learning systems. Aligning Mandarin education with Zambia's socio-economic realities is essential to ensure that learner expectations translate into tangible outcomes.

The study also contributes theoretically by extending Soft Power Theory, Cultural Globalization Theory, and Diffusion of Innovations Theory within an African educational context. It demonstrates that language education functions as a negotiated form of soft power, reflects hybrid cultural globalization processes, and diffuses unevenly within resource-constrained systems. Overall, the study concludes that while Mandarin education in Zambia has achieved notable growth, its long-term success depends on policy support, capacity building, curriculum localization, and deeper community integration to transform it into a sustainable and locally grounded educational pathway.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends the development of a comprehensive national foreign language strategy that formally integrates Mandarin across all levels of education, allowing for early exposure through a phased and well-coordinated rollout. Strengthening local capacity is important, particularly through deliberate investment in training and certifying Zambian Mandarin teachers to reduce reliance on external instructors and enhance programme sustainability.

Finally, the study calls for stronger monitoring and evaluation systems to track programme quality and outcomes, alongside increased public sensitization through media and community outreach to improve awareness, correct misconceptions, and broaden participation in Chinese language education across Zambia.

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