

A Critical Analysis of the Factors Contributing to Poor Pupil Performance in Grade 12 English Language Final Examinations.

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to establish factors that contribute to Grade 12 pupils' poor performance in English Language in Zambia and to suggest strategies that can be used to improve performance in grade 12 examinations in Zambia. This study was purely qualitative and employed a descriptive case study design. Secondary school teachers, heads of departments, learners (current and past), deputy head-teachers, English Language Examiners, parents, and standards officers (both at district and provincial level) were included in the sample. Instruments used in data collection included interviews, document analysis and focused group discussions. According to the findings, some of the factors which contributed to poor performance included lack of supervision of teachers, work overloads on the teachers, overcrowding in the classrooms, shortage of teachers, lack of teaching and learning materials and poor language proficiency in English among learners. In addition, the study also established strategies that can be used to improve performance. These include improving school based and district-based monitoring and supervision, reducing the workload for teachers, expanding infrastructure, employing of more teachers and providing adequate teaching and learning materials.

Keywords: *Poor Performance, Grade 12, proficiency, examination.*

Background

English is the medium of instruction in education in all schools from Grade 5 through to tertiary education (Ministry of Education, 2015). This is further echoed by Mwanza (2016) who observed that in Zambia, English is the official language and the primary medium of instruction from upper primary to tertiary education. English Language is the medium of instruction in secondary schools in Zambia. English language plays an important role and facilitates overall learning in schools. Mastery of English is indispensable for learners to excel academically, as all key subjects in secondary and tertiary education are taught and examined in English (cf. Mwanza, 2016). Because of using English in various key sectors of the country, the language has gained a higher status than ethnic languages. Zambia recognises English as its official language, utilising it across government, administrative, and legal sectors. This establishes English as essential for communication in official and formal settings.

At Grade 12 level, learners are expected to display advanced writing skills, including research papers, literary critiques, and extended essays. They should also show advanced public speaking skills, including the ability to present and defend complex ideas. It is at this stage that teachers are expected to intensively prepare learners for national examinations. In Zambia, the Grade 12 English Language examination is a high-stake assessment that determines pupils' eligibility for tertiary education and professional training (Kalinde & Verster, 2016). Poor performance in this examination not only limits pupils' academic

progression but also affects their ability to participate effectively in national and global economic activities (Mbozi, 2019).

English, as a key and pivotal subject, significantly influences pupils' academic trajectories within the Zambian educational context. The ongoing concern among educators, policymakers, and researchers regarding pupils' persistent poor performance in the English examinations highlights its critical importance. As the official language and language of instruction in Zambian schools, English is vital for pupils' academic and professional future. Nevertheless, the persistent underachievement in English examinations suggests a deeper systemic problem that requires a thorough academic examination.

Masuku (2023) carried research aimed at finding ways of improving the educational performance of Grade 12 progressed learners in English first additional language. The study was carried out in South Africa in Gert Sibande District. The research findings revealed that students have challenges stemming from their not having foundational understanding in grammar and literature coupled with inadequate support from teachers. To bridge this gap, there was need to improve preparation in earlier grades. Furthermore, a study by Nakale and Lita (2020) conducted in Omusati Education Region in Namibia in their quest to highlight factors that influence Grade 12 learners' performance in English as a second language revealed that there was low English proficiency among learners. The cause of the low proficiency was attributed to non-availability of resources, ineffective instructional methods and learners' low socio-economic status. Additionally, the study revealed that parental involvement and teacher motivation played pivotal roles in learner performance.

The Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) reports from 2014 to 2021 have indicated that many learners perform poorly in English. Learners' underachievement in English raises a concern over their translation of knowledge of language skills in a practical situation. The ECZ reports highlight that grade 12 examination candidates present a range of problems in their performance in English language. The ECZ report of 2020 cited poor knowledge of grammar, spellings, limited vocabulary and poor sentence construction among others as some of the factors responsible for the pupils' poor performance in English language.

Sakala (2020) also argued that grade 12 results in second language teaching were not impressive because the language is an imposition on the Zambian education system, and it was not very common in most rural schools and communities. Due to this, results in English have continued to be poor at grade 12. However, the Ministry of Education's point of view is that learner performance is improving from time to time because the ministry has put in mechanisms to achieve its mandate, (MOE, 2019). Table 1 and 2 show both statistical results in percentage and result statistics in actual numbers.

Table 1: National Grade 12 English Result Statistics in Percentage

YEAR	NO. SAT	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6	G7	G8	G9	TOTAL FAIL %
2018	119,187	3.46	5.34	15.73	7.49	8.24	17.72	17.14	15.21	9.65	9.65
2019	134 578	4.04	4.83	13.21	8.75	7.83	18.45	16.27	15.89	10.73	10.73
2020	146,558	3.09	5.74	16.30	6.70	7.57	19.25	11.27	13.20	16.87	16.87
2021	121,443	2.08	5.75	16.03	7.53	8.53	18.72	15.53	14.46	10.09	10.09
2022	124,795	2.86	6.14	19.23	5.86	9.32	18.26	15.06	12.31	10.95	10.95
2023	163,200	4.76	5.60	14.00	8.25	7.35	20.67	15.05	13.85	10.45	10.45

Source: ECZ, 2019.

Table 2: National Grade 12 English Result Statistics in Actual Numbers

YEAR	NO. SAT	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6	G7	G8	G9	TOTAL FAIL
2018	119,187	4124	6373	18755	8931	9823	21125	20428	18131	11497	11497
2019	134 578	5435	6511	17776	11774	10533	24828	21890	21391	14440	14440
2020	146,558	4524	8416	23895	9824	11095	28217	16522	19343	24722	24722
2021	121,443	2532	6989	19464	9142	10363	22736	18855	17565	12256	12256
2022	124,795	3568	7662	23992	7313	11636	22790	18794	15372	13668	13668
2023	163,200	7774	9139	22850	13468	12003	33740	24566	22599	17061	17061

The data presented in Table 1 shows the total number of candidates who sat for the English examination and the grades they obtained are shown in percentage. Table 2 shows the actual number of candidates who sat for the examinations and the grades they obtained are converted from percentages to actual numbers. Table 2 shows that a total number of 119 187 candidates sat for English examinations and 11,497 (9.65%) failed English language in the year 2018. In 2019, a total number of 134, 578 candidates sat for English language at Grade 12 level and 14,440 (10.73%) candidates failed the English language. In 2020, 146 558 Grade 12 candidates sat for English language and out of the total number, 24,722 (16.87%) failed the English language. In 2021, the total number of Grade 12 candidates who sate for English examination was 121, 443 and a total number of 12, 256 (10.09%) candidates failed. In 2022, 124, 795 Grade 12 candidates sat for Grade 12 examination and 13,668 (10.95%) candidates failed English language. Meanwhile, in 2023, a total candidature of 163, 200 sat for English language examinations. Out of this number, 17,061 (10.45%) failed the examinations completely. From the statistics presented in table 1, the percentages seem less yet the number of candidates who failed English language is alarming as indicated in table 2. These high numbers of pupils failing English made it necessary to investigate factors that affect pupils' underachievement in English and suggest strategies that can improve performance.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to establish factors that contribute to Grade 12 pupils' poor performance in English Language in Zambia and to suggest strategies that can be used to improve performance in grade 12 examinations in Zambia.

METHODS AND MATERIALS.

This study employed a descriptive case study design. Four districts were sampled. Two schools were sampled from each district: one located in an urban area and the other situated in a rural setting. The study sample consisted of 10 current Grade 12 pupils from each school, 2 former pupils who had failed English final examinations from each school, and 3 teachers of English per school from the 8 secondary schools that participated in the study. 8 Deputy head-teachers from 8 schools, 8 Heads of Languages Department, 5 Grade 12 National Markers (assessors) for the English language, 1 Senior Education Standards Officer (SESO) Languages, 4 District Education Standard Officers (DESOs), 2 parents from each school, and 2 ECZ officials. The total sample size for this study was 164. Data was collected using interviews with teachers, parents school administrators and national examiners. In addition, focus group discussions were conducted with pupils. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Therefore, data was sorted, coded and themes were generated and presented as findings.

FINDINGS

The research questions looked at the factors which contributed to learners' poor performance in English and strategies that can be used to improve performance in Zambian Schools. To answer these research questions, interviews were conducted with teachers, pupils, parents and school administrators. The triangulation of data sources was used to strengthen the data and to avoid the bias that would potentially be found in one source. The data was presented accorded to the themes which were generated.

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE POOR PERFORMANCE OF PUPILS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXAMINATIONS

Teacher Related Factors

Teacher factors refer to what a teacher does or does not do which influences learners' outcomes academically. They can also be elements which affect the teacher to perform his or her teaching correctly or adequately. The following are the teacher related factors according to the findings:

Absenteeism by teachers and reporting late for work/lessons

Findings revealed that teachers were often absent from work. Respondents explained that sometimes, teachers were in school but did not go to class which made them miss their teaching periods and never bothered to make up for the time lost while others had a habit of reporting late for lessons. Below are some of the responses which were given:

Absenteeism is one of the contributing factors due to time loss. Some teachers absent themselves frequently. Some teachers are in school but do not attend to learners during their teaching time. (Tr5)

Teachers steal time from pupils through absenteeism and late coming and in the end the pupils suffer by failing. (Tr1)

Some teachers like to miss lessons. They report for work, but they do not come to teach us. (L2S8)

Lack of or Inadequate Preparation for Lessons

The findings revealed that inadequate or lack of lesson preparation was one of the major contributing factors to Grade 12 pupils performing poorly in English national examinations. Respondents said that teachers did not want to prepare for their lessons as indicated from the respondents' narratives:

Teachers are too busy with other things other than lesson preparation. A teacher is teaching a topic that is self-lending, but this teacher has no teaching aids or planned visual aids to reinforce learning. If teaching aids are there, they may not align with the lesson. What does that say about a teacher? (A1)

Many of our young teachers do not want to prepare for their lessons and some teachers who have been in the service for too long since they feel they know what to teach. (HOD5)

We have 87 or more pupils in one class and marking assignments takes ages. Between marking and other administrative duties, it is challenging or rather difficult to find time for detailed lesson planning. (Tr18)

Incomplete Syllabus Coverage

The respondents highlighted the fact that teachers did not usually complete the syllabus and did not adhere to teaching content prescribed in the syllabus within the time stipulated in the syllabus. Some teachers had a tendency of skipping certain topics they found difficult. They further explained that many teachers did not complete the syllabus and deliberately left out certain topics that they knew learners struggled to understand so that they would be covered during extra tuitions as a way of forcing learners to enroll for extra tuitions. Here is what they said:

Most of our learners are of low quality in terms of foundational knowledge, so they need more time to understand topics and that delays the completion of the syllabus. (Tr16)

Many teachers do not complete the syllabus deliberately. They leave out certain topics that they know we learners struggle to understand and say that these topics will be covered during extra tuitions. (L7S7)

Lack of Feedback or Inconsistent Feedback

The respondents reported that teachers rarely gave feedback to learners. They explained that lack of feedback caused learners to feel discouraged. They further highlighted that teachers' failure to recognise learners' effort through feedback had a negative effect on learner performance. Below are excerpts from the respondents.

Learners struggle immensely in trying to understand where they are not doing things rightly and how to correct their mistakes due to lack of feedback. (Tr14)

One of the big problems that we face as learners is teachers not marking our books on time and sometimes not marking at all. (L6S6)

When I was in school, we rarely received feedback from teachers especially in English. Mistakes that I made were not corrected in time, so it is possible that I reproduced them in my final examinations resulting into my poor results in English. (FP1)

School Related Factors

School related factors in teaching and learning are those factors which are caused by the school or are the responsibility of the school in the teaching and learning process. Below are the school related factors which were common among respondents.

Over-enrolment and its effects in schools

The respondents cited over-enrolment as a critical problem affecting the performance of Grade 12 pupils in English. They explained that over-enrolment led to overcrowded classrooms, which created physical and auditory challenges for teaching and learning. Here is what they said:

There are too many pupils in class, and there is a lot of noise in our class, so the teacher spends more time controlling noise especially after break and the periods that come just before break or lunch. (L4S2)

There's simply not enough time to assess each pupil's work thoroughly due high numbers, and we end up focusing on group instruction otherwise we can't manage to cover even half the syllabus. (Tr5)

Lack of / or Inadequate Teaching Materials

The respondents reported the absence or insufficiency of teaching materials which made it difficult to meet the varied educational needs of learners. Below is what some respondents said:

Books are not adequate, so it is difficult to study and prepare well for tests and worse still for our final examinations. (L2S8)

Teaching comprehension and vocabulary is challenging when pupils share textbooks. They need to see the text to familiarise themselves with the spellings and associate pronunciations with actual words. (Tr8)

We have nineteen Grade 12 textbooks against ninety (90) plus learners. We compromise the standards on comprehension. Planning and teaching are really made difficult. Learners cannot study at home due to lack of materials. (HOD6)

Lack of or Inconsistent Monitoring

The respondents reported that there was lack of or inconsistent monitoring in government secondary schools at all levels of administration starting with heads of departments, deputy head teachers, head teachers and district education officials. Because of this inconsistency, accountability and maintaining high educational standards is compromised. Below are some of the responses:

Standard officers from the Ministry of Education do not regularly visit us or inspect to find out what we are struggling with to provide guidance on

pedagogical issues. It is difficult to stay updated with current teaching strategies when we are not monitored to ascertain knowledge gaps. (Tr23)

Sometimes monitoring has been done, but we have had challenges with follow-ups on recommendations leading to unresolved problems. (A6)

Sometimes it is the administrators themselves who do not set an example for their teachers, so they fail to monitor their teachers. (P5)

Limited Opportunities for Professional Development

The respondents reported that teachers had limited opportunities for professional development to improve on their already acquired skills, update their knowledge in their subject areas. In addition, administrators said that they were unable to provide training opportunities for teachers because of budget constraints. Here are some of the responses:

In our school it is rare that we have any meaningful workshops or get experts to train us so we can update our knowledge and ways of teaching English. (Tr20)

We lack exposure to modern pedagogical techniques, so we often face challenges and struggle to adapt our teaching to meet needs of 21st century learners. (Tr13)

We miss opportunities for professional development programmes due to lack of or limited financial resources in the schools. (Tr23)

Learner Related Factors

The section below presents learner related factors influencing the academic performance of Grade 12 learners in English Language in selected secondary schools. Learner factors refer to characteristics or things which a learner has control over and are responsible for. In this study, the following learner factors were identified:

Absenteeism by Learners

Respondents reported that absenteeism was a prevalent problem among pupils. They explained that it was negative as it disrupted the learning process and hindered overall academic progress. Here are some excerpts from respondents.

One of the factors that has contributed to our poor performance or low grades in English is absenteeism. We do not attend all the lessons sometimes due to peer pressure, parents being sick or parents failing to provide bus fare. (L3S5)

There has never been a day when all the pupils report for class. They take turns to be absent and they do not care to check the work that they missed. (Tr8)

Learner Inability to Read and Write

Respondents explained that at Grade 12 level, pupils failed to read and write effectively which weakened their ability to succeed in school as they were unable to comprehend instructions, follow lesson proceedings and ask questions when in doubt. Presented below are some of the responses:

Many of us Grade 12 pupils in this school cannot read or write properly in English, so it is difficult to understand questions during tests or examinations. (L10S8)

I never participated fully in class activities because I could not read and write. (FP14)

Most candidates who fail English cannot read and write. They do not understand the questions due to their inability to read, so it is obvious that they cannot answer the questions. (NE2)

We were able to read and write already in early grades, but today it is the very opposite. Many of our children who are in Grade 12 cannot read or write properly. (P1)

Lack of Parental Support

Respondents reported that low parental involvement negatively affected Grade 12 pupils' performance in English. They also said that pupils whose parents were not involved in school activities had low educational goals and did not see the value of school and rarely encouraged their children to take school seriously. Some of the respondents stated the following:

Since we don't have textbooks that we can carry home to study, our parents don't buy the textbooks we need. (L8S3)

Many parents do not attend meetings or collect report forms for their children, so they do not know how their children are progressing in school. (A8)

We send our children to school because we believe the teachers are doing their job, so we stay out of it since we are not trained teachers. (P1)

Policy Related Factors

The other category of factors contributing to poor performance of learners is related to education policies. Under this theme, three factors were identified from the findings. These are:

Removal of English as a Compulsory Passing Subject at Grade 9

Respondents explained that the removal of English as a compulsory passing subject had broader implications on educational outcomes. They highlighted that the policy had negatively hindered English language performance at the Grade 12 level. Below are some of the responses:

Teachers have a tough time to convince us to work hard in English because we were allowed to proceed to Grade 10. Many students think English doesn't matter anymore. (L7S2).

Since the removal of English as compulsory passing subject, our pupils have stopped taking assessments in English seriously. As teachers we feel less supported in enforcing high educational standards in English. (Tr18)

If a pupil fails Grade 9, evidently, there is a gap in the acquisition and mastery of basic grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension skills in written and oral work. (HOD4)

Abolition of cut off points for Grade 9 examinations

Respondents explained that pupils who progressed to Grade 12 without meeting the required cut-off points lacked the necessary language skills needed to perform well at higher grade level. Some of the respondents explained as follows:

Pupils who pass and those who fail are put together creating a mix of abilities. The mix of abilities makes it problematic to plan lessons that meet the needs of all learners. The advanced pupils lose interest when they must wait for slow learners. (Tr5)

The removal of cut-off points has contributed to diminished accountability of both pupils and teachers for meeting academic benchmarks. The teachers have shifted their focus from academic preparedness to merely progressing pupils. That zeal to push learners is no longer there. (HOD2)

STRATEGIES THAT CAN BE USED TO IMPROVE PUPILS' PERFORMANCE IN GRADE 12 EXAMINATIONS IN ZAMBIA.

The second objective aimed at establishing the strategies which can be used to improve the poor learner performance in English language. In the sections, I will present the strategies as identified from the data.

Improve school based and district-based monitoring and supervision

Respondents explained that absenteeism undermined schools' effort to excel. Once it was addressed, it would also enhance pupil motivation and achievement levels. Here are the respondents' views:

The administration in collaboration with HODs should intensify tracking attendance using departmental registers. (Tr6)

We could try to conduct unannounced or informal visits to the classrooms to track absenteeism daily. (A7)

The HODs must schedule a termly plan for weekly departmental review meetings to discuss lesson delivery and student performance to provide interventions in good time. (HOD1)

Heads of department should ensure each teacher has a lesson plan before going to teach

Respondents explained that administrators should regularly check teachers' lesson preparation books or lesson plans and randomly collect samples of learners' work as a useful way of gathering informative pupil performance data. Below are selected verbatim:

Teachers' files should be checked frequently by the HODs and the administrators to see if they correspond to work in learners' books. (HOD4)

Administrators should strengthen teacher supervision and ensure that no teacher goes to teach without an approved lesson plan. (P5)

New teachers should be paired with experienced teachers for mentorship to enhance lesson preparation and reduce on partial syllabus coverage. (HOD1)

Reduced workload for teachers

The respondents highlighted that there was need for administrators needed to reduce teachers' workload to give teachers time to attend to giving feedback. Below are some of the responses:

Schools should reduce class size so that we are able to mark and return books to pupils in good time. (Tr5)

Our workloads should be reduced to give us more time to mark books and provide timely and appropriate interventions according to learners' needs. (Tr18)

Infrastructure Expansion

Respondents explained that there was an urgent need for infrastructure expansion and provision of resources like desks. Some respondents particularly teachers and administrators advocated for more resource allocation and construction of additional classrooms and schools to accommodate the growing numbers of pupils. Here are some narratives:

The government can work with the PTA to build more classrooms to reduce the number of pupils per class. (L2S8)

We can conduct a "Buy a brick" campaign to help construct more classrooms in our former school. (FP3)

We will lobby MOGE for increased funding to enable us construct classrooms. (A6)

Employment of more teachers

Respondents explained that coordinated effort was a must to address the issue of high teacher -to-pupil ratio in schools resulting from over-enrolment. They suggested that the government should employ more teachers to improve teacher-pupil ration. The following are some of the responses:

The government should employ more teachers so that we can all receive help from teachers when we need it. (L9S5)

The government should employ more qualified teachers of English to help schools meet the demands and needs of overpopulated classes and improve the quality of instruction. (Tr20)

The government should recruit more teachers of English to decongest classes. (HOD8)

Multi-sectoral approach to provision of adequate teaching and learning materials

Respondents reported that school administrators needed to be proactive in sourcing for teaching and learning materials. They explained that teachers could set up partnerships with other schools to exchange or borrow extra resources and use technology and offline apps to teach. Here is what some respondents said:

Hold internal material production competitions to encourage learners to create their own supplementary study materials. (HOD3)

Initiate corporate social responsibility (CSR) partnerships with businesses for resource donations. (A3)

We could work with our former schools to create an alumni fund specifically for purchasing teaching and learning materials. (FP1)

We can hold workshops or forums where teachers can learn how to create innovative, low-cost teaching aids. (Tr8)

Provision of Learning Opportunities for Teachers

Respondents explained that schools should invest in teaching training to upscale their skills, knowledge and competencies. They emphasised the need for teachers to keep up to date with the latest developments through in-house workshop. Below are some narratives:

We should revive the Provincial Language Teachers Association of Zambia (LATAZ) where national markers can be invited to train teachers on standard marking and weighting. (Tr2)

School CPD should be re-enforced and school CPD schedules should be strictly adhered to. (HOD2)

Departments must be encouraged to identify areas of need and be allowed to invite resource persons to conduct in-house training at least once or twice a year. (HOD6)

Teachers to collaborate with parents to tackle learner absenteeism

Respondents explained that tackling absenteeism required the school and community to work together. They highlighted the importance of parent engagement in monitoring attendance. Here are some narratives.

Class teachers need to take keen interest in learners who frequently miss lessons and engage their parents earlier. (L2S5)

Coordinate occasional visits to families of chronically absent learners to address underlying issues. (Tr18)

Parents should work with school to help monitor children's attendance. (P1)

Schools should communicate a child's absence immediately. (P4)

Use of Various Techniques to Teach Reading and Writing

Respondents explained that schools needed to find creative ways of teaching reading and writing to respond to pupils' needs. They further explained that parents needed to be encouraged to take an active role in monitoring homework. Below are some of the responses:

Teachers need to prepare differentiated lessons for varied skill levels and creating tiered assignment to correspond to pupil needs. (Tr6)

We need to integrate literacy games and You-tube videos using interactive tools. (Tr18)

The teachers should incorporate activities that focus more on reading and writing skills in their lessons. (HOD1)

Establish mentorship programmes to improve learner motivation

Respondents explained that schools needed to deliberately plan and implement programmes to educate pupils on values that promote success. Here are narratives:

Schools should invite former successful pupils to give motivational talks or to share personal experiences of how discipline improved their performance and career outcomes. (FP5)

Schools can also work at establishing alumni mentorship programmes to provide guidance to learners on how to manage academic and personal challenges. (FP2)

Making English a compulsory passing subject at every examination level

Respondents explained that the Ministry of General Education should re-introduce English as a mandatory passing subject at Grade to promote accountability among learners. Here are some of the responses:

The Ministry of Education should re-introduce the cut-off point at Grade 9 level and allow pupils who are ready for high content to proceed to Grade 10. This measure will also address the language proficiency issue. (HOD4)

English should be made a compulsory passing subject at Grade 9 to encourage learners to work hard in preparation for Grade 12 examinations. (A7)

Cut-off points and passing English as a mandatory subject should be re-introduced to raise the standard of education and help our children become more accountable. (P3)

DISCUSSIONS

The first objective examined factors that contribute to poor performance in the English language national examinations. The findings showed that there were four categories of factors contributing to poor performance in grade 12 learners in English language. The discussion of findings will be done under each of these categories and their respective sub themes. Below is the discussion of findings:

Teacher Related Factors

Teacher-related factors play a crucial role in shaping pupils' academic performance in English at the Grade 12 level (Mkandawire, 2022). Teacher related factors are those factors that fall under the responsibility of the teachers. These are factors which are under the control of a teacher. The factors presented in the findings chapter are discussed below:

Absenteeism by teachers and reporting late for work/lessons

The findings revealed that some teachers frequently missed classes, either by being absent from school or by not attending to scheduled lessons even when present in school. After missing lessons, they often did not compensate for the lost instructional time. Duflo, Hanna, and Ryan (2012) explained that teacher absenteeism significantly affected pupil achievement by reducing instructional time and increasing classroom disruptions. When teachers are frequently absent, pupils experience inconsistencies in lesson delivery, which leads to difficulty in mastering essential language skills such as reading comprehension, writing, and grammar application. Banerjee & Duflo (2011) argue that disruptions in learning cause learners to cognitively disengage. Additionally, the loss of instructional time caused by absenteeism is particularly detrimental to subjects like English, where consistent exposure and practice are essential for proficiency.

According to Chaulhury et al. (2006), teacher tardiness is a common problem in many developing nations, which significantly reduces pupil engagement leading to instruction. The findings underscore the detrimental effects of teacher absenteeism and lateness on pupils' English performance. To improve learning outcomes, it is imperative that education stakeholders implement robust measures to enhance teacher accountability and ensure consistent instructional delivery. A well-structured, time-conscious teaching approach is crucial for fostering better English language proficiency among pupils.

Lack of or Inadequate Preparation for Lessons

The finding revealed that inadequate or lack of lesson preparation was a major factor contributing to poor Grade 12 English examination performance. Both young teachers and some experienced ones neglected lesson planning, with the latter relying on their familiarity with the subject. Experienced teachers who become complacent and rely on their accumulated knowledge without proper planning risk failing to align their teaching with contemporary pedagogical strategies. Darling-Hammond (2006) believes that this practice reduces the effectiveness of instruction, leading to diminished learning outcomes among pupils. Richards and Farrell (2011) elucidate that lesson preparation is a fundamental aspect of effective teaching and directly impacts pupil performance.

The findings in this study also showed that teachers blamed their inability to prepare adequately on teaching loads. They explained that they did not have enough time to prepare because they had many classes and many pupils to attend to. Although lack of preparedness for classes cannot be justified, the reasons for inadequate preparation cited by teachers need to be taken seriously. In fact, other studies such as Simukonde and Chanda (2019) also observed that excessive workload among teachers of English results in lower commitment to lesson planning, inadequate preparation, and reduced effectiveness in lesson delivery.

The findings underscore the urgent need for interventions to address inadequate lesson preparation among teachers. Schools and policymakers must explore ways to reduce teacher workloads, provide professional development opportunities, and enforce accountability measures to ensure effective lesson planning.

Incomplete Syllabus Coverage

The finding revealed that teachers did not usually complete the syllabus and did not adhere to teaching content prescribed in the syllabus within the time stipulated in the syllabus. Some teachers tended to avoid covering topics that they found challenging because they were incapable of handling them. This finding is supported by Shulman (1986) who argues that teachers' pedagogical content knowledge significantly influences their ability to effectively teach subject matter. When teachers lack confidence in certain topics, they may either avoid them or provide inadequate explanations, leaving pupils with significant knowledge gaps. The findings further showed that teachers did not teach certain important topics as a way of coercing learners to sign up for private lessons with them. The finding agrees with Bray (2009) who posits that the privatisation of supplementary education can deepen socio-economic disparities, as wealthier learners gain better academic support while financially disadvantaged learners' struggle.

Lack of Feedback or Inconsistent Feedback

The finding revealed that teachers rarely gave timely, consistent and elaborate feedback to learners leading to learners not knowing where they went wrong and how they could improve. Lack of feedback had a negative effect on learner performance. Hattie and Timperley (2007) observed that effective feedback is crucial for learning, helping pupils identify strengths, address weaknesses, and improve performance. Delayed or absent feedback reduces motivation, causes confusion, and lowers engagement (Shute, 2008). Regular feedback enhances academic performance by helping pupils track progress and make improvements (Brookhart, 2017). Inadequate feedback has lasting effects, as uncorrected errors become ingrained and hinder academic performance. It is a key teacher-related factor affecting English proficiency, leading to knowledge gaps that negatively impact examination results.

School Related Factors

School factors refer to factors or causes of pupil failure which are the responsibility of the school. These are factors which are under the control of the school and school management can control the said factors. Below is a discussion of such factors:

Over-enrolment and its effects in schools

Findings revealed that over-enrolment was a critical problem affecting the performance of Grade 12 pupils in English. It led to overcrowded classrooms, high teacher-to-pupil ratios, reduced teacher-pupil interaction, teacher-centred pedagogy, and shortage of furniture. Overcrowding negatively impacted teaching effectiveness, learner engagement, individualised support all of which were needed to enhance the English language proficiency. The finding aligns with Owoeye and Yara (2011) who noted that the size of classroom, sitting position and arrangement... impact learning outcomes. Overcrowded classrooms hinder effective teacher-pupil interaction, which is essential for meaningful learning. High teacher-pupil ratios also create classroom management challenges, making it difficult to maintain an effective learning environment (Blatchford, Bassett, and Brown, 2011). Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development highlights the need for tailored support, which becomes impractical in such settings. Additionally, some pupils avoid asking questions due to fear or feeling lost, impacting their confidence and engagement. This lack of participation negatively affects language development, as active learning and reinforcement are crucial for mastering English.

Overcrowded classrooms hinder the implementation of learner-centred teaching, forcing teachers to rely on lecture-based methods instead of interactive approaches (Chikoti, 2022; Mkandawire, et al., 2023). This reduces learner participation and engagement. Additionally, teachers struggle to provide timely feedback on written and spoken exercises, which is essential for improving English proficiency.

Lack and Inadequate Teaching Materials

The findings revealed that lack or scarcity of instructional resources made it challenging to meet learners' diverse educational needs. The scarcity of instructional resources limits learners' ability to study independently and to adequately prepare for examinations. Lack of resources hinders reading proficiency and exacerbates literacy challenges. Shared textbooks and reliance on chalkboard instruction reduce pupil

engagement and comprehension, while large class sizes further restrict teachers' ability to monitor progress effectively. Studies such as World Bank (2019), Maala and Mkandawire (2022), Lungu and Mkandawire (2022), Kafusha et al. (2021), Chella et al. (2023), Iversen and Mkandawire (2020), Pretorius and Spaul (2016), and Nag et al. (2019) underscore the critical role of access to print materials in language learning, while Darling-Hammond (2020) emphasises the need for adequate resources to enhance instructional quality and learner outcomes. Lack of adequate teaching materials, reliance on traditional instructional methods, and limited institutional support, significantly contribute to poor English performance among pupils.

Lack of or Inconsistent Monitoring

The finding showed that government secondary schools lacked consistent monitoring at all administrative levels, from departmental heads to district education officials. Teacher absenteeism, substance abuse, and overall apathy toward their duties were prevalent in the sampled schools. This culture of impunity led to lost instructional time and diminished engagement in English lessons, ultimately hindering language proficiency among learners. Administrators were unable to enforce teacher accountability or uphold high educational standards, leading to potential declines in teaching effectiveness and pupil performance as was observed. The finding is supported by Bush (2019) who postulates that ineffective school leadership weakens discipline enforcement, leading to teacher laxity and perpetuating poor instructional quality. Monitoring plays a crucial role in identifying strategies to improve educational quality and addressing specific challenges in teaching and learning and the lasting impact of school improvements depends on the extent to which monitoring findings are implemented.

Limited Opportunities for Professional Development

The finding revealed that teachers had limited opportunities for professional development to enhance their skills and update subject knowledge. Administrators cited budget constraints as a barrier to providing training opportunities. Limited professional development hindered teachers from maintaining high standards and adapting to 21st-century educational changes. Darling-Hammond et al., (2017) argued that professional development is crucial for equipping teachers with skills to meet evolving 21st-century learner needs. Failure to adapt to new teaching methods worsens poor pupil performance, as traditional methods may seem unengaging and disconnected from learners' own experience. Underfunding hampers teacher training, limiting professional development and access to essential materials and technology needed for interactive classrooms. Addressing poor learner performance requires targeted investments in teachers' continuous learning, better resource allocation, and a shift toward modern, learner-centred teaching practices.

Learner Related Factors

Learner-related factors are those factors which can be blamed on the learners. These are factors which can be controlled by learners. In other words, learner related factors are those which are the responsibility of the learners. Below is a discussion of learner related factors:

Absenteeism by Learners

The research indicated that Grade 12 pupils experienced high absenteeism which exacerbated their poor performance in the English Language. The findings showed that consistent absence created learning disruptions which led to pupils falling behind their expected curriculum progress while also creating knowledge gaps. Learners missed essential language concepts because of their absences which impacted their examination results. Teachers reported that learner absenteeism interfered with ongoing educational progress. Absence-related gaps in learning often created conflicts when teachers needed to assist pupils falling behind while keeping pace with curriculum needs leading teachers to deliver basic topic content. The research data shows that absenteeism results in academic underperformance especially in subjects that need regular practice like English Language. Schools should start using attendance tracking systems yet combine these with parent involvement to enforce attendance compliance and create after-school assistance for learners who often miss classes.

Learner Inability to Read and Write

A considerable number of Grade 12 pupils faced difficulties with English reading and writing according to research findings while their educational achievement experienced adverse effects as a result. The findings revealed that some learners demonstrated inadequate abilities to develop grammatical sentences in both reading fluency and written comprehension. These pupils faced extreme difficulties in completing examinations successfully as well as in clear idea presentation and active participation in academic works. Weak foundations built during earlier grades serve as a primary reason behind this situation. Mulenga & Phiri (2022) noted a decline in the effectiveness of early literacy instruction, possibly due to inadequate teacher training, ineffective pedagogical approaches, and large class sizes that limit individualised support.

Learners often struggle with English due to insufficient early exposure and inadequate reinforcement in school at primary levels. Irregular pronunciation and spelling further hinder literacy impacting academic performance by making comprehension and task completion difficult (Pretorius & Spaul, 2016). A lack of foundational literacy skills is a primary determinant of poor performance in secondary school examinations (Banda and Zulu (2018). The literacy gap causes learners to perform poorly in the English Language examinations. To assist struggling learners, additional literacy support should be established through remedial reading and writing sessions in classrooms.

Lack of Parental Support

Findings indicated that socio-economic factors like poverty, illness, and little parental education hindered engagement, negatively affecting Grade 12 English performance. Parents with limited education often failed to recognise the value of schooling, leading to minimal encouragement for their children. Lack of involvement weakened the connection between home and school, affecting pupil motivation. The finding aligns with Epstein (2018) who confirms that lower parental engagement correlates with weaker academic outcomes. Furthermore, teachers observed that some parents neglected disciplinary responsibilities, expecting educators to manage all issues. However, participation in school affairs significantly influences pupil achievement and behaviour.

Policy Related Factors

Policy factors are those factors which are caused by certain policies. In short, these are factors which can be attributed to existing educational policies which are deemed to be counterproductive in as far as learner performance is concerned. Below is a discussion of policy related factors:

Removal of English as a Compulsory Passing Subject at Grade 9

The study revealed that the removal of English as a compulsory passing subject at the Grade 9 level has had far-reaching implications on educational outcomes, particularly on pupil performance at the Grade 12 level. One of the major consequences of this policy shift is the diminished motivation among pupils to prioritise English. This finding aligns with Musonda and Mwanza (2021) who found that pupils had negative attitudes towards English since it was removed as a mandatory passing subject which in turn impacted their performance. Moreover, the removal of English as a compulsory passing subject has led to gaps in foundational language skills. Pupils who were allowed to proceed to Grade 10 without passing English also experienced significant difficulties at Grade 12 level. Teachers also expressed concerns about the decline in pupil engagement and seriousness in English assessments. This aligns with Nurlatifah and Mauriyat (2020) who also found out that the removal of English from elementary school curriculum in Indonesia led to decreased pupil enthusiasm for learning English and a subsequent lack of vocabulary knowledge at higher educational levels. Additionally, the impact of this policy change has extended beyond individual learners to the overall classroom environment in Zambia.

Abolition of cut off points for Grade 9 examinations

Findings revealed that the abolition of cut-off points for Grade 9 examinations in Zambia has prompted significant concerns among educators regarding its impact on learner motivation, academic preparedness, and overall educational outcomes. Kanchele (2014) revealed that both teachers and pupils perceived the policy change as detrimental to the quality of education. Teachers reported that the removal of cut-off points led to a decline in competition among learners, reduced accountability, and posed challenges in lesson planning due to the increased presence of mixed-ability classes. The current study reported that the absence of clear academic consequences was observed to undermine learners' commitment to hard work and achievement, potentially promoting mediocrity. This sentiment aligns with findings that suggest the removal of performance benchmarks can lead to decreased learner motivation and a lack of incentive to excel academically (Kanchele, 2014). The policy was well intentioned, but it was implemented without putting adequate support measures in place. It has been criticised for not considering its negative impact on overall educational quality.

STRATEGIES THAT CAN BE USED TO IMPROVE PUPILS' PERFORMANCE IN GRADE 12 EXAMINATIONS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ZAMBIA.

The second objective focuses on strategies that can be used to improve pupils' performance in Grade 12 examinations in the English Language in secondary schools in the Copperbelt Province. Each of the strategies forms a theme under which the discussion of findings for objective 2 is discussed:

Improve school based and district-based monitoring and supervision

Improving school based and district monitoring was a strategy that was revealed on strategies that can be used to improve pupils' performance in Grade 12 examinations in English Language. This finding showed that teachers cited monitoring of teachers as a method of improving results. Monitoring encompassed aspects on tracking teachers' reporting time, and inspectors from the Ministry of Education monitoring schools. Namfukwe, (2016) believes that monitoring of teaching greatly improves areas of need where teachers need assistance with such as training and professional development that led to continuous improvement in teaching quality.

Reduced workload for teachers

The research indicated that lowering teacher workload presented itself as a possibility to enhance performance in Grade 12 examinations among pupils. According to the findings, teachers face increased workloads which hindered their capacity to deliver thorough feedback to learners individually. The literature confirms this viewpoint because Churches et al. (2022) observed that less workload allows teachers to create more interactive educational activities. The essential focus should move beyond simple reductions of workload because current real-world conditions demand teachers to find practical methods which allow them to manage their heavy workloads effectively.

Infrastructure Expansion

Secondary school infrastructure development serves as an essential educational approach to better both the learning environment and Grade 12 examination results. The development of expanded school building infrastructure through classroom and laboratory, library and sanitation facilities construction provide learners with improved learning spaces for better participation while enabling them access to educational resources. Every school improvement leads learners to concentrate their efforts more efficiently during their studies thus contributing to better examination scores. This finding aligns with Yangambi (2023) who revealed that infrastructure expansion can significantly improve learner performance in examinations by providing a better learning environment and access to resources by having enough buildings and comfortable seating that forms an environment where learners have a better focus without any distractions.

Financial difficulties in Zambia should not impede infrastructure growth because proper planning techniques alongside strategic budget allocation methods will create possibilities for expansion. The government shows its dedication through Constituency Development Fund (CDF) growth and this funding assists in multiple school infrastructure initiatives around different districts. Education improvements in the country receive ongoing support from Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and international donated funding provided by organisations including UNICEF and the World Bank.

Employment of more teachers

Employing more teachers was another finding that was revealed as a strategy in improving pupil performance in national examinations. Employing more teachers meant reduction of workload for the existing teachers and to meet the demands and needs of

classes which are overcrowded by learners. Employing more teachers as a strategy was aimed at addressing the workload of teachers as well as improving class sizes. This finding aligns with Njoroge (2023) who established that employing more teachers can positively impact learner performance in national examinations by reducing class sizes and providing more personalised attention to learners. He further stated that providing academic and emotional support to the learners can lead to improved performance. However, there is no guarantee that when more teachers are employed, then teaching and learning will also improve. In the factors contributing to poor performance, teacher absenteeism was highlighted where teachers are present in school but do not attend to learners. It is teachers' attitudes that need to change for performance to improve.

Multi-sectoral approach to provision of adequate teaching and learning materials

Multi-sectoral approach to the provision of adequate teaching and learning resources was another finding that was revealed on the strategies that can be used to improve pupils' performance in Grade 12 examinations in secondary schools in the Copperbelt Province. This entails that there is a need for teachers to create learning resources with the learners or by partnering with other schools and other donor organisations for donations of resources. In addition, teachers should be taught how to be innovative in the provision of teaching and learning resources by teaching teachers on how to create low-cost teaching materials. This finding corresponds to Muthoni and Kinyua (2020) who established that the use of instructional materials in the classrooms can improve learner engagement, a better comprehension of concepts, and higher examination performance. Once learners have adequate access to a variety of learning resources, they perform better in their examinations. Usage of relevant, high-quality instructional materials, such as diagrams, charts, and interactive activities, was found to promote active learning, improve critical thinking, and consequently enhance examination results

Provision of Learning Opportunities for Teachers

Provision of learning opportunities is another finding that emerged on the strategies that can be used to improve pupil performance in examinations. This means that teachers need refresher courses on modern teaching methodologies, assessment techniques, skills to use formative assessments effectively, skills on how to provide constructive feedback, and design assessment strategies that align with learning objectives, CPD focusing on key areas where learners struggle, such as comprehension, writing, and grammar, training on using digital tools, e-learning platforms, and multimedia resources to enhance learner engagement and improve instruction besides their initial teaching course so that they improve their teaching methods and acquire new skills on learner engagement. This finding corresponds to Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) who revealed the need for teachers to be engaged in ongoing learning opportunities so that they are better equipped to implement effective teaching methods which can lead to improved learner outcomes and thus will translate into learner achievement because learners are better prepared for national examinations. If teachers received consistent training from experienced educators, such as national examiners, their confidence in delivering high-quality instruction would improve, subsequently benefiting learners.

Teachers to Collaborate with Parents to Tackle Learner Absenteeism

Parental involvement is crucial in monitoring learner attendance and reinforcing discipline. Many absentee pupils lack parental supervision, leading to academic neglect. When parents take an active role in their children's education, they help create a structured home environment that supports learning and discipline. However, many parents remain disengaged due to work commitments, lack of education, or financial hardships, contributing to continued absenteeism. These findings agree with Mkandawire and Tambulukani (2017) who noted that the collaboration between teachers and parents to the children works to the advantage of the learner.

The findings reveal that teacher engagement plays a critical role in mitigating absenteeism, which significantly affects learner performance in English. Vroom (1964) underscores the importance of teacher expectations and efforts in motivating learners to attend classes. When teachers actively engage with parents and intervene early in cases of absenteeism, they reinforce the belief that consistent attendance leads to better performance. Introducing home visit programmes for chronically absent pupils allows teachers and school administrators to engage directly with parents and guardians, ensuring that issues affecting school attendance are addressed at the household level. Jeynes (2016) found that parental engagement directly influences academic performance, with higher involvement leading to improved attendance, discipline, and motivation. Other studies highlight that community-driven initiatives, such as parental involvement programmes, can significantly reduce absenteeism rates and improve learner discipline.

Establishing Functional Libraries to Provide Literacy Materials

Many schools lacked well-stocked libraries, depriving learners of essential reading materials for language development was another finding. The absence of functional libraries hinders independent reading habits, limiting learners' ability to improve their vocabulary, comprehension skills, and overall English. Schools that do not prioritise library access often struggle to cultivate a culture of reading among learners, which negatively impacts their academic performance (Chella et al., 2023). Guthrie & Wigfield (2019) emphasised that consistent access to books significantly enhances literacy and comprehension skills.

Use of Various Techniques to Teach Reading and Writing

Rigid teaching methods contribute to poor literacy skills. Many teachers rely on outdated lecture-based instruction, which often fails to cater to different learning styles. However, findings revealed a gap in differentiated instruction, the integration of interactive tools, and a lack of emphasis on reading and writing skills. The absence of activities explicitly designed for reading and writing development suggests a structural issue in lesson planning. Engaging and interactive teaching techniques can enhance pupil comprehension, encourage participation, and improve language fluency (Mkandawire et al., 2022). Cain & Oakhill (2011) suggest that diverse teaching strategies improve reading comprehension and writing proficiency. Therefore, integration of multimedia tools and interactive teaching methods are effective ways of enhancing pupil engagement and performance. To address this challenge, teachers should adopt phonics-based approaches for early reading interventions, helping learners develop strong foundational literacy skills. Implementing peer-to-peer learning, where proficient readers assist struggling classmates

in guided reading sessions, fosters collaborative learning and builds confidence among learners. Incorporating storytelling, creative writing workshops, and technology-driven learning tools can make lessons more engaging and interactive, improving both reading comprehension and writing proficiency.

Establish mentorship programmes to improve learner motivation

The findings revealed that educational institutions should establish mentoring programmes as a method to enhance learner motivation levels. Research investigations show that learner motivation together with academic success receives beneficial impact from mentorship programmes. This finding agrees with Gaddis (2022) who established that mentorship develops powerful behavioural effects and attitudinal effects, motivational effects and career-related effects in learners who receive mentorship as they gain psychosocial support together with academic guidance and career mentorship. Additionally, educating learners on time management and ethical behaviour aligns with self-regulatory principles that improve academic engagement (Zimmerman, 2002). Schools need to partner with alumni and specialists to create mentoring programmes that will motivate learners and boost their English language self-confidence. Such organised methods promote mentorship programmes which deliver impactful benefits while maintaining programme sustainability.

Policy Related Factors

This part of the discussion focuses on the policy related factors that impact performance. Policy factors are factors that schools may have no control over but have to give account to the public and sometimes the public is not well informed about policies in place.

Making English a compulsory passing subject at every examination level.

Both teachers and administrators highlighted the lack of clear and consistent standards for progression, particularly concerning the mandatory passing of English at Grade 9. When the government made English an optional passing subject at Grade 9, it caused a significant drop in literacy abilities among Zambian pupils. The English subject became non-compulsory according to Musonda (2021) which resulted in learners losing interest thus developing weaker English skills throughout their Grade 12 year (Musonda and Mwanza, 2021). Success in motivation follows directly from the importance of subjects according to Expectancy Theory. The nation experiences reduced literacy rates since learners engage less in studying English after it became an optional passing subject (Graham, 2021). The English language remains accessible in urban environments, however, educational resources in rural areas lead to social segregation of pupils. These policy adjustments will resolve the described gap: Authorities should reinstate English as an essential subject for completion. By implementing these measures learners can build fundamental communication competencies that will help them in obtaining success both in college and professional life.

Conclusion

The study reported factors that contribute to poor performance in Grade 12 English Language examinations in Zambia. The contributing factors were attributed to the teacher,

the school, the learner and policies which have been enacted in the Zambian education system. In addition, the study also established strategies that can be used to improve performance. These include improving school based and district-based monitoring and supervision, reducing the workload for teachers, expanding infrastructure, employing of more teachers and providing adequate teaching and learning materials. In addition, there is need to provide learning opportunities for teachers, teachers to collaborate with parents to tackle learner absenteeism, establishing functional libraries to provide literacy materials, using of various techniques to teach reading and writing, establishing mentorship programmes to improve learner motivation and making English a compulsory passing subject at every examination level.

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