

A Synthesis of Strategic Lessons from Chinese Language Education in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of Chinese language education in Zambia, primarily through the Confucius Institute at the University of Zambia (CI-UNZA), represents a significant shift in the country's linguistic and educational landscape. While Mandarin has gained prominence globally as a language of economic, diplomatic, and cultural influence, its integration into African education systems remains uneven and under-explored. In Zambia, learners increasingly perceive Mandarin proficiency as a gateway to scholarships, employment, and international mobility, reflecting the growing influence of China's investment and soft-power strategies. Yet, despite substantial enrolments and programmatic expansion, questions persist regarding the effectiveness, sustainability, and broader lessons of these initiatives within the Zambian context. Understanding these lessons is important for multiple reasons. First, the rapid growth of Mandarin education raises concerns about institutional capacity, curriculum alignment, teacher preparedness, and the long-term viability of programs dependent on external support. Second, Zambia's multilingual education system already contends with structural challenges, including limited instructional resources, teacher shortages, and policy inconsistencies, which may be exacerbated by the introduction of a high-demand foreign language. Finally, while global scholarship on Confucius Institutes and Chinese language education has documented trends in Asia, Europe, and other African countries, there remains a paucity of empirical evidence examining the practical lessons and policy implications emerging from Zambian learners' experiences.

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.

Lessons from Zambia's experience with the Confucius Institute according to literature

The establishment and expansion of Confucius Institute (CI) programs in Zambia provide a rich context for examining both the opportunities and challenges associated with foreign language education, particularly Mandarin. Empirical evidence from multiple studies unveils the interplay of learner enthusiasm, teacher preparedness, institutional coordination, and community engagement in shaping program effectiveness.

Zhong et al. (2021), in their mixed-methods study *Epistemological Beliefs and Conceptions About Language Teaching and Learning*, investigated perceptions among 100 secondary school learners and 10 teachers of Mandarin in Zambia. Their findings highlight a striking motivational contrast: while all students (100%) expressed enthusiasm for learning Mandarin, viewing it as a gateway to international networking and employment opportunities, approximately 30% of teachers approached the initiative with skepticism, framing it as a potential instrument of cultural dominance. This divergence raises important pedagogical concerns, particularly regarding the coherence of instructional delivery and the alignment of teacher beliefs with student motivations. The study suggests that without reflective teacher training and ongoing professional development, learner enthusiasm may not translate into sustained educational outcomes, as teachers' uncertainties could subtly influence curriculum delivery, assessment, and classroom engagement.

These findings resonate with prior research on teacher preparedness in Zambia. Mutolwa (2019) reported that 51.2% of language lecturers had significant gaps in Continuous Professional Development (CPD), which constrains their capacity to adopt innovative teaching strategies and respond effectively to evolving student needs. Similarly, Ngalande and Chigeda (2013) identified a persistent policy-practice gap in teacher education for multilingual classrooms, highlighting structural and systemic factors that impede effective language instruction. Although these studies did not focus specifically on Mandarin, they reinforce the lesson that the success of CI programs is contingent upon harmonizing teacher competence and pedagogical alignment with curricular objectives. Without deliberate investment in educator training, Mandarin education risks being underutilized despite high student interest.

Community engagement, frequently cited as a hallmark of CI outreach, demonstrates both the potential and limitations of these initiatives. Mufalali (2019), in *Confucius Institute Outreach and Community Perceptions*, conducted focus group discussions with 60 community members in Lusaka, examining their perceptions of CI cultural activities. While 67% of respondents reported positive views of CI-led events and their contributions to intercultural understanding, 52% critiqued the initiatives as superficial, sporadic, or insufficiently embedded to generate lasting impact. These findings suggest that public engagement, though visible, may lack the depth and continuity necessary to foster sustained intercultural competence and societal integration. Compared with Mwansa and Chileshe's (2018) institutional perspective, Mufalali adds a grassroots lens, emphasizing the importance of continuity, contextual relevance, and community-centered design.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, Chinese language initiatives should not operate in pedagogical or policy silos; their sustainability depends on deliberate alignment with both national educational strategies and the linguistic ecology of multilingual classrooms. Second, long-term planning, curricular integration, and teacher training must mirror Zambia's past successes with national language policy, ensuring that Mandarin education is institutionally anchored and socially relevant. Programs that neglect these structural and policy considerations risk remaining peripheral, regardless of initial enthusiasm or external support.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a Qualitative case study design from Confucius Institute of the University of Zambia. 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.

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 semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The interviews and discussions generated qualitative data on institutional management, policy alignment, and sociocultural influences. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes.

Lessons learnt from the implementation and growth of Chinese language education

The findings of this study revealed several key lessons from Zambia’s experience with Chinese language education. The findings revealed several important lessons regarding the delivery, management, and sustainability of Chinese language education in Zambia, particularly as implemented through the Confucius Institute at the University of Zambia. A prominent theme emerging from the learner discussions relates to instructional effectiveness. 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. This finding shows the importance of integrating experiential and application-based approaches to enhance language acquisition.

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.

Finally, learners stressed the importance of public sensitization and the integration of Chinese cultural materials into mainstream societal spaces. Respondents recommended various media strategies, including television programs, podcasts, and the promotion of Chinese literature through bookstores. As Respondent 12 stated, *“They should use media such as TV programs and podcasts to sensitize the community,”* while Respondent 14 added, *“They should promote Chinese literature in bookstores such as Bookworld or Bookhut.”* These measures were seen as important for increasing the visibility of Mandarin education, normalizing its study within the broader Zambian society, and fostering an appreciation of Chinese language and culture among the general public.

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, the Ministry emphasized the need for stronger policies that address teacher training, material development, and curriculum alignment. The respondent explained that *“the challenges can inform policy... There is a need for Zambian teachers, materials, and integration at the right level.”* Further, the Ministry stressed the national goal of strengthening Zambia’s global competitiveness, affirming that *“we need a citizenry that can compete at international level.”*

Lecturers also emphasised the value of integrating cultural education with language instruction. Cultural events, festivals, and exchange programmes were described as essential for sustaining student interest and creating

immersive learning experiences. Respondent 3 explained that *“language learning improves significantly when students are exposed to cultural activities; the cultural programmes motivate learners.”*

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The 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; Gómez & Pérez, 2022).

Despite these reservations, the strongest quantitative lesson relates to positive cross-cultural outcomes, with 86.7% agreeing that Mandarin education has improved interactions between Zambians and Chinese nationals. This supports findings in the literature review that language learning enhances intercultural competence and reduces misconceptions in Sino-African engagement. Studies in Tanzania (Masanilo & Ammann, 2023), Egypt (Alsun, 2024), and Zambia itself (Tembo & Lungu, 2022) similarly affirm that Mandarin programmes foster better communication, mutual understanding, and people-to-people diplomacy.

Another major lesson concerns the consistent call for greater Zambian participation in Mandarin instruction, reflected in 86.7% of respondents advocating for increased local involvement and 73.4% supporting national investment in Zambia’s own Mandarin teaching infrastructure. This aligns with documented African experiences showing that overreliance on volunteer teachers from China undermines sustainability (Nkrumah, 2024; Phiri et al., 2022). The Ministry’s account of disrupted examination cycles during COVID-19 provides concrete evidence that dependence on external instructors creates structural vulnerabilities, an issue similarly observed in Uganda and Zimbabwe, where local teacher shortages hinder programme continuity.

A further lesson relates to equity and transparency in programme administration, particularly regarding scholarship allocation. Reports of perceived favoritism indicate the need for standardized criteria and clear communication. Studies in Ghana and South Africa similarly highlight how opaque scholarship systems can create mistrust, undermine motivation, and shape negative social perceptions of Mandarin programmes (Gómez & Pérez, 2022).

The findings from this study showed that although CIUNZA has expanded its reach across the country, operational capacity remains uneven, with notable shortages in teaching resources, limited digital infrastructure, and inconsistent support systems. These results strongly mirror the systemic challenges found in Phiri, Banda, and Nkombo’s (2022) research, which showed that 74% of foreign language programmes in Zambian universities lacked adequate instructional materials. Even though Mandarin is managed under a specialized institutional partnership, the structural weaknesses affecting other foreign languages appear to affect CIUNZA as well. The absence of fully equipped language laboratories, reported also by Siame and Mubemba (2020), continues to limit the quality of instruction and reduces learners’ opportunities for technological immersion, an essential component for tonal languages like Chinese.

Another significant finding relates to CIUNZA’s community outreach and public engagement efforts, which participants viewed as both beneficial and insufficiently sustained. While cultural festivals, language competitions, and Chinese New Year celebrations enhance visibility, concerns were raised that such events are episodic and lack long-term community integration. These concerns parallel the sentiments documented by Mufalali (2019), where 67% of community members viewed CI cultural events positively but 52% felt they were too infrequent to have lasting impact. Moreover, the programme’s sustainability remains uncertain without steady financial and institutional support, reflecting the risks identified by Kunda and Tembo (2022), who found that only 29% of Mandarin programmes could operate independently without Chinese funding.

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 contributes to the growing body of literature on foreign language education in multilingual African contexts by providing empirical insights into the lessons learned from the implementation of Mandarin programs in Zambia. It demonstrates that the expansion of Chinese language education through the Confucius Institute is shaped by a complex interplay of institutional capacity, learner motivation, policy alignment, and socio-economic factors. The findings highlight both opportunities and challenges that while Mandarin offers pathways to employability, scholarships, and global engagement, sustainable growth depends on strengthening local institutional frameworks, investing in teacher training, and ensuring that programs align with national educational priorities. Ultimately, the study reveals the importance of learning from experience, suggesting that the careful integration of international language programs can enhance educational outcomes while supporting broader socio-economic and cultural development objectives in Zambia and comparable contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve Chinese education in Zambia, the following should be taken into consideration.

Localization of Teaching Capacity: There is need to prioritize the training and recruitment of Zambian Mandarin teachers to reduce long-term dependency on expatriate volunteers. It is also important to utilize the 2026 treasury authority for teacher recruitment to specifically allocate positions for qualified local language instructors. Furthermore, it is better to create formal pathways for Zambians currently studying in China to return and serve as certified Mandarin educators in Zambian secondary schools.

Integration of Digital and Smart Learning: For this programme to succeed, there is need to leverage bilateral agreements with China to establish smart labs and modernize school infrastructure to support digital language tools. Use of specialized apps (e.g., Pleco for dictionaries, Skritter for characters) should be encouraged and social media tools like WeChat to facilitate real-time communication and resource sharing. In addition, there is need to explore AI-driven online learning systems to provide personalized tutoring, helping to mitigate the challenges of large class sizes.

Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms: It is important to move away from purely theoretical, exam-oriented curricula toward Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that focuses on practical workplace application, such as professional translation and industry-specific terminology (e.g., fisheries or engineering). There is need to integrate "Education for Sustainability" (EfS) into the Mandarin curriculum, using real-world case studies to build global citizenship alongside linguistic skills. Lastly but not the least, there is urgent need to actively address cultural stereotypes in the classroom and incorporate "cultural artifacts" into lessons to move beyond political-strategic perceptions and foster genuine cross-cultural understanding.

Policy and Institutional Sustainability: In order to reduce the "funding monopoly" of external entities, the Zambian government and private sector should increase domestic investment in language programs. It is important to ensure that the policy should ensure Mandarin programs complement, rather than detract from, the preservation of indigenous Zambian languages (e.g., Bemba) by adopting additive multilingualism strategies. Furthermore, establish a joint China-Zambia academic cooperation charter and credit transfer system to standardize proficiency levels and professional qualifications.

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