

Stakeholders` Perception of the Language of Instruction Policy in Malawian Primary Schools and its Implications for the Quality of Education

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Abstract

The language of instruction or the language of learning policy for Malawi states that students should be taught using their mother tongue/ language during the first four years of Primary and in English from standard five onwards. This study examines how stakeholders perceive this policy and how it is implemented. To achieve these objectives, these research questions were set: what language is used as a language of instruction; what are the stakeholders` attitudes towards the initial use of mother tongue and the switch to English; and what adaptations and changes stakeholders made during the implementation process that should shape the future of education in Malawi. A questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students of standard 4 and 6, their teachers, head teachers and the district education manager of Mangochi district. Analysis of data indicates that language used for instruction is different from the mother tongue of 90 percent of the students. This is the case because stakeholders believe that the national language and English are more useful in finding employment and passing nation examinations. However, the study found that most students surveyed, are unable to read and write texts in Chichewa and English. The study concludes that by partially implementing the policy, the quality of education is affected in Mangochi, Malawi.

1. Introduction

According to Gandara & Gomez (2009, p. 581) “a clear definition of language policy, remains elusive, because the field of language policy and planning (LPP) is relatively new”. However, Crawford (2000) defines language policy as:

What government does officially- through legislation, court decisions, executive action, or other means- to (a) determine how languages are used in public contexts, (b) cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities, or (c) establish the rights of individuals or groups to learn, use, and maintain language, and (2) government regulation of its own language use, including steps to facilitate clear communication, train and recruit personnel, guarantee due process, foster political participation, and provide access to public services, proceeding, and documents (as cited by Gandara & Gomez 2009, p. 581).

In Malawi where there have been three main political administrations, there have been

policy shifts which are similar to the objectives indicated by Crawford in the citation and which define the language policy in Malawi.

For instance, the language policy objective during the colonial period was to use language that would help cultivate the local populace that would read, write, and do simple arithmetic. During this period Lingua Francas across the country were used which included Chitumbuka in the North, Chichewa in the Centre and South, and Chiyao in some parts of the Southern region (Kayambazinthu, 1998). This was followed by the introduction of the mandatory use of Chichewa as a national language and English as the official language during the one-party dictatorship of Dr. Banda. This was changed to a rights-based objective during the multiparty democracy from 1994 led by Bakili Muluzi (Mchazime, 2001; Chilora, 2000).

In March, 1996 the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture directed that from standard 1 to 4 of primary schooling students should be taught in their mother tongue or vernacular language. From standard 5 to 8, the policy directed that students should be taught in English. The policy went on to indicate that Chichewa and English should be school subjects in the whole primary curriculum (Secretary for Education's letter Ref. No. IN/2/14, 28 March 1996). In this policy directive mother tongue/ vernacular language is defined as the language that is mostly spoken in the area where students reside. Some of the justifications for this directive were that it could help students participate more in their lessons rather than struggle with the new school language (Chilora, 2000). Secondly, reference was made to some research work which stated for example, that; "The past two decades have seen a growing interest in using learners' first language for learning, both for rights-based reasons and for reasons of improving educational access and quality", (Kosonen 2012, p.83). These justifications constitute what this article would like to examine and try to understand what the situation in primary schools in Malawi is.

1.1 The Language Situation in Malawi

English is the official language while Chichewa is the national language. However, the constitution of Malawi (2006) stipulates that every person has the right to use any language and participate in any cultural activities of his/her choice. The 2008 Population and Housing Census indicate the population to be 13.1 million. This population is comprised of 13 tribes which include; the Chewa, Lomwe, Yao, Ngoni, Tumbuka, Nyanja, Sena, Tonga, Ngonde, Nyakyusa, Lambya, Senga, and others (NSO, 2008). These tribes are presented in a descending order, that is to say, from the majority to the minority ones. Every tribe has its specific language and culture which is in most cases indicated by adding "Chi-" to the tribal name. This means that there are as many languages as there are tribes.

Where different tribes co-exist and speak different native languages, there develops a need for a common language known as the "lingua-franca" (Salzmann 2007, p.376). In Malawi six languages can be recognized as lingua-franca and these are Chichewa, Chilomwe, Chiyao, Chisena, Chitumbuka, and Chitonga. This was determined based on the distinction between language and dialect made by Ball and Farr (2003, p. 436) who distinguish the two thus:

The term language is used to refer to the abstract system underlying the collective totality

of the speech and writing behavior of a community; the term dialect is used to refer to a regional or socially distinctive variety of a language, identified by a particular set of words and grammatical structures.

In summary, people can be said to speak a different language when they cannot understand each other but if they can, then their language can be considered as one. A good example is the common features observed between Chinyanja and Chichewa that led to the agreement that Chinyanja is a dialect of Chichewa (Kayambazinthu 1998).

This means that the languages that can be used as students' mother tongue/ vernacular in the classroom can either be Chichewa, Chilomwe, Chiyao, Chilomwe, Chisena, Chitumbuka, or Chitonga. These languages are also used on the national radio and TV station which means most students are most likely exposed to at least one of them. The following paragraphs will highlight the situation in three primary schools from one district in Malawi mainly to illustrate how these languages are perceived and used to bring about quality education. The district visited was Mangochi where Chiyao is commonly spoken. The participants in the study hereby referred to as stakeholders included: 8- to 15- years old students from standard 4 and 6 who responded to a questionnaire; their teachers, head teachers of the visited schools, and the district education manager of Mangochi district. These answered semi- structured interview questions.

1.2 Language of Instruction in Study Sites of Mangochi District

This district is also known as the Lake District because a bigger part of Lake Malawi crosses through it. The total area is 6, 273 square kilometers and the district has a total population of 610 239 (NSO, 2008). Mangochi is famous for fishing in the lake as well as tourism. These activities expose people in the district to different speakers of different languages from outside. But Chiyao is the main language spoken by the Yao people who are the majority population in this district. Islam is a common religion in Mangochi such that a good number of young children are enrolled in the Koranic school as opposed to the conventional primary schools. In such Koranic schools, Arabic and Chiyao are the most used languages.

Considering the size and population of Mangochi, three schools were visited. The first school to be visited (MH1), is a rural school located at about 19 kilometers East of the district education office. In an English lesson for standard 4 students were taught using English only as the language of instruction. For the other subjects, Chichewa was mostly used for both standard 4 and 6. Outside the classroom situation, the main language used was Chiyao and this was observed among students as well as between students and teachers. School records indicated that 99 per cent of the students enrolled in this school are from the Yao tribe.

The second school visited in Mangochi was (MH2) which is an urban school located just about 1 kilometer from the district education office. Like MH1 in this school, Chichewa and English are the languages used for instruction and their usage is reinforced by the teachers even outside the classroom setting. However, the language that students use amongst themselves was mostly Chiyao.

The third school visited in Mangochi was (MH3) which is located at approximately 23 kilometers west of the district education office. Students from eight villages enroll into this school. Of these eight villages four are dominated by Chiyao speakers and the other four by Chichewa (Chinyanja) speakers. Chichewa and English are the languages used for instruction and Chichewa was the language that was observed to be in use by almost all the students outside the classroom setting.

2. Stakeholders' Perceptions and Reactions to the Language Policy

The following paragraphs will present the stakeholders' perceptions and reactions to the language of instruction policy from all the three schools. To begin with, in the demographic distribution of the ethnic tribes of Malawi, Mangochi is among the districts where the Yao tribe is in the majority. This being the case, the mother language for school going children is expected to be Chiyao. This, according to the policy would be the students' language of instruction, especially for the first four years, with English from standard 5 onwards. With an equal number of boys and girls from standard 4 and 6 as respondents, one could expect to have a 1:1 indication of the mother language and English as languages of instruction in the visited schools. The following is what was actually found by this study.

The question "What language is used in the classroom?" was asked to students of the three schools visited in Mangochi. Here is what they indicated as the languages of instruction:

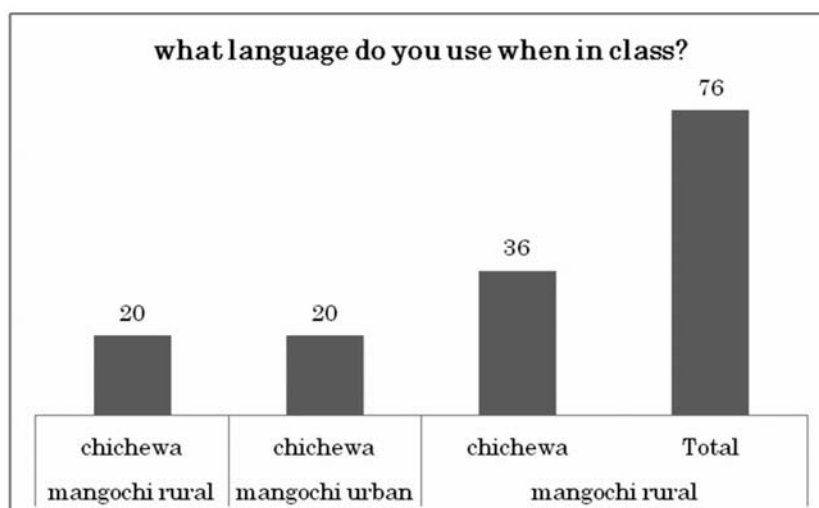


Figure 2.0.1 Students' Perceived Language of Instruction in Mangochi

This chart shows that in all the schools visited in Mangochi, Chichewa is the perceived language of instruction. This was indicated by all the respondents regardless of their gender, age, or standard. These results were surprising considering the policy and the language that students were speaking outside the classroom: so the researchers asked why this was the case. The interviews with teachers and the school head teachers revealed that this is the case because

teachers do emphasize that students speak Chichewa in school as opposed to their mother language Chiyao. The teachers` reasons for doing this include the following;

(1) “ They don’t speak Chichewa at home of course, but we encourage them to speak it here because there is a subject of Chichewa which they are supposed to sit for during national examinations. So if they get used to mixing Chichewa and Chiyao, they fail these national examinations. The most common problem is the pronunciation of the letter “ Z”. They mostly pronounce it as “ S”. So we discourage the use of Chiyao in school because when writing they write what they speak.” (Extract from an interview with a standard 6 teacher from MH2 School)

“(2) “ Teaching them in Chiyao will be problematic because if we say that every child should be learning in his/her home language, they will have language difficulties once they leave their home area to other language areas. Right now we may say that Chichewa and English are the languages we need to use if we are to avoid such communication problems in future. These are like our national languages.” (Extract from an interview with standard 4 teachers from MH1 School)

These views from teachers reinforce the idea in the minds of the learners that the school language is Chichewa. Of course, the teachers also pointed out that they use English with Chichewa translation of some words in the senior sections as well as using Chiyao to explain some concepts which are not clear to students when given in Chichewa. These two languages English and Chiyao when used in class are not perceived as languages of instruction by the learners, though. That is indicated in figure 2.0.1 and it could be because of the limited time these languages are in use during instruction.

The study found that students from MH3 School consider Chichewa as their only language of instruction because school records and the head teacher indicated that about half of the students come from Chichewa speaking households. This fact, in addition to the reported tendency of translating English lessons into Chichewa, gave the students the perception that Chichewa is the language of instruction, and it can be considered as being in line with the policy.

When asked the same question, the District Education Manager for Mangochi pointed out that throughout his district teachers use “*Chichewa as a language of instruction because it can be understood by most learners.*” It is clear therefore, that in Mangochi despite the existence of Chiyao speaking students, Chichewa is the language that is used in school.

Even though it has been established that the local language used in schools in Mangochi is only Chichewa, students were still asked to give their attitudes towards the other languages they come in contact with in the school setting which include Chiyao, and English. The students were asked to indicate their level of interest in learning when one of these languages was used as a language of instruction. The following are the results:

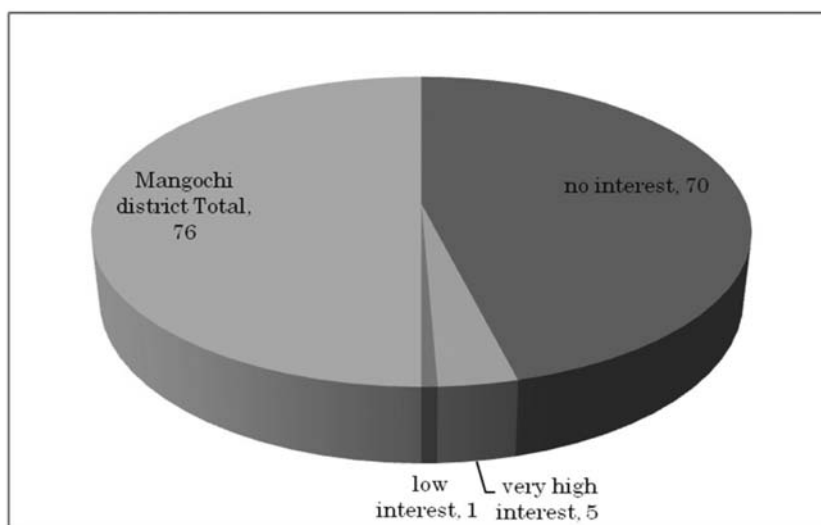


Figure 2.0.2 Students Attitudes Towards Chiyao as a Classroom Language

This chart shows that the majority of the students have a negative attitude towards instruction in Chiyao. This is most likely due to the attitude that teachers have towards Chiyao as shown above. This has been remarked as one of the significant aspects of the teaching profession by Osborn & McNess (2005) who assert that: “When confronted with change, and in particular with reform imposed from above, a proportion of teachers in many countries, even those working in highly prescriptive, centrally controlled systems, will respond by subverting, mediating, reinventing, or developing a creative response”. In Mangochi, most teachers are subverting the policy with the result that only 5 students who represent 7 % of the participants have positive attitudes towards Chiyao. In other words, teachers only use Chiyao to help clarify ambiguities that exist between some Chichewa and Chiyao words. One example of such ambiguous words cited by the head teacher of MH1 School is “mbewu”: in Chichewa it means “seeds” while in Chiyao it means “cockroach”. The teachers clear this ambiguity by specifying that they are talking about the Chichewa mbewu or the Chiyao mbewu depending on the context. The students however, are not allowed to ask questions, make sentences, or discuss lesson contents in Chiyao.

The next section of this paper examines students’ attitude towards English as a language of instruction since the policy directed that they should be taught in English from standard 5 onwards. Here are what came out as their levels of interest when English was used not just to clear ambiguities but to explain the contents of the lesson to them.

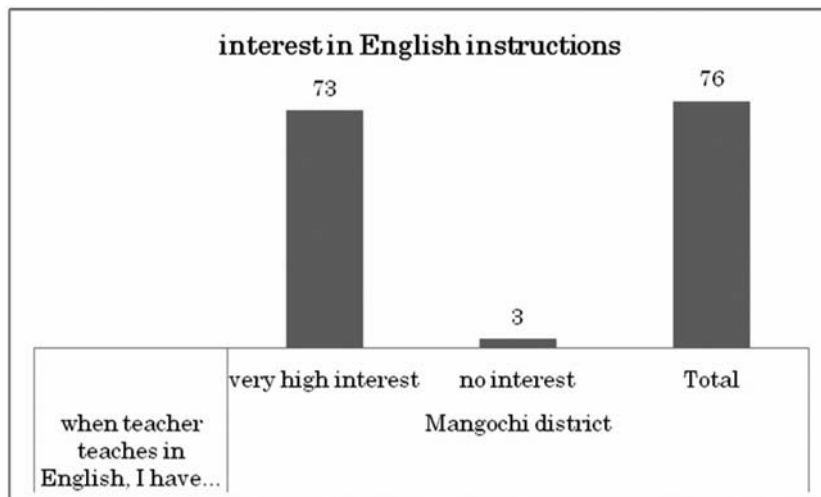


Figure 2.0.3 Students Attitude Towards English as a Language of Instruction

Although students did not indicate English as a language of instruction when answering the first question, it is shown in this figure that they do have very positive attitudes toward its use in the classroom. Of course, this interest has to be understood within the background of having extrinsic motives other than intrinsic ones which could result in actual learning taking place. In other words, having a teacher in front of students who is speaking English is perceived as “real schooling”. Students will listen to a teacher for as long as he/she speaks but when he/she asks the students if they understood a word, students would say “no”. The teachers on their part indicated that they satisfy this need for instruction in English by explaining things to the students in Chichewa for the senior primary section. In a geography lesson for example, the teacher would teach the four cardinal points by giving their Chichewa translations and this is different from the explanations from Chichewa to Chiyao.

In actual classroom practice, teachers from MH1 and MH2 Schools do have positive attitudes towards the use of Chiyao when giving Chichewa instructions for the junior primary section and English with Chichewa translations for the senior primary section. For instance, one standard 4 teacher from MH1 School commented that;

“According to this district, especially from this area going all the way to the border with Mozambique it is purely the area for the Yao tribe. As such, we use Chiyao in order to assist students understand what the lesson is about. This Chiyao is mainly used to supplement the use of Chichewa. The fact is that when one uses Chichewa only, students make comments like; “I didn’t get anything from that lesson”. Such comments are minimized by using Chiyao to explain the key learning points of the lesson.” (Extract from an interview)

This statement means that teachers have positive attitudes towards the use of local language because it assists them in making their lessons clearer to learners. For the switch to English, all the teachers from Mangochi agree that it is a good practice and should be encouraged because

it helps open up windows of communication with the world outside the Chiyao/ Chichewa environments. The only point most of them emphasized was that, English should be used with Chichewa translations to ensure that students understand the core contents of a given lesson.

Commenting on the whole practice of using local language for the first four years and then switching to English at standard 5, the District Education Manager (DEM) for Mangochi stressed that; *“Teaching students in the vernacular in lower classes has not helped them understand issues. Teachers have problems in senior classes and performance has weakened further”* (extract from an interview). This shows that the DEM is not really in favor of the practice. His recommendation is that students be taught in English from the time they join the primary school up to when they finish their studies. This will help the students understand issues more broadly and their performance will improve.

It is clear now that in Mangochi there is no real consensus on what the language of instruction should be. First students indicated Chichewa as the only language used in the classroom (figure 2.0.1); but they also indicated having strong interest in teachers` use of English as a language of instruction. Second the teachers and head teachers indicated that they use Chiyao to explain difficult Chichewa learning points, and English with Chichewa translation for the senior primary section. The DEM on his part, views the use of the vernacular as having negative effects on students` performance. Because of this lack of consensus, this study now proceeds to the analysis of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the whole policy.

The teachers and head teachers mainly see this policy as strong in that it allows them to explain the content of their lessons in the language they think students will understand better. They do have that choice to switch from Chichewa to Chiyao instruction or from English to Chichewa as long as such a switch will facilitate students comprehension of the facts to be learned. Some of the policy`s weaknesses that were pointed out include the following: that there are no teaching and learning materials produced in students` mother languages such as Chiyao, that teacher deployment does not take into consideration the language that the teacher speaks and the language spoken in the area where he/she is deployed, and that in general teachers are not trained to teach in any language other than Chichewa.

To the list of weaknesses of the policy the District Education Manager for Mangochi added the following:

- It is difficult to find teachers who can speak the local language fluently;
- Some areas have so many dialects that it is difficult to take into consideration all their differences then decide which one is the majority mother tongue to use in school;
- There are no textbooks written in other languages (besides in Chichewa and English);
- Since there is poor interface between the local language and English at standard 5, students fail to understand certain concepts.

In order to check the validity of one of the arguments as indicative of the weaknesses of the policy that teachers may have no knowledge of the local language of the area they are sent

to work, the following statement was proposed to students and they were requested to rate their level of agreement with it from strongly agree to strongly disagree: “My Teachers know my home language so they translate the lesson to it”. The following are the outcomes:

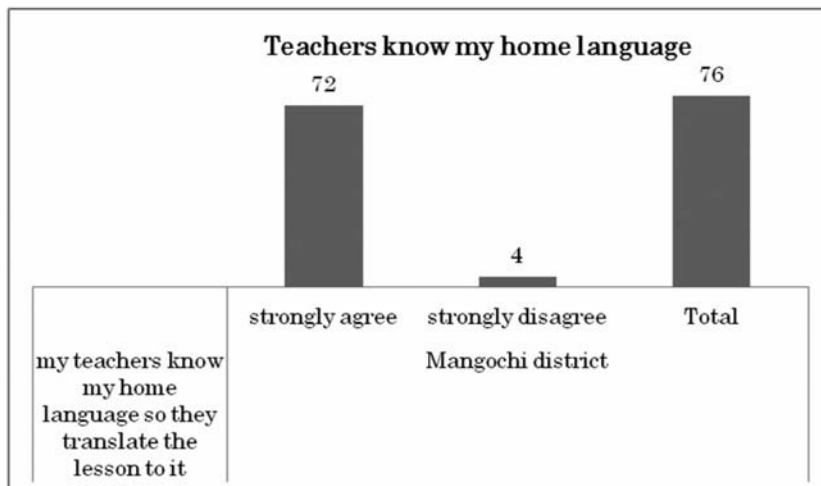


Figure 2.0.4 Teachers` Knowledge of Students` Mother Language

This figure show that at least from the students’ perspective, their teachers have very good knowledge of their mother/home language and that translations of new words from any language used in the classroom are made so as to facilitate students understanding of the contents of the lessons. Translation therefore, is one aspect that can be seen as part of an adaptive process to implement the policy. Additionally, the head teacher of MH1 School indicated that he would like teachers of the junior primary section to be able to speak the language of the area where they are posted. From the visited schools, the study found that all teachers of these junior primary sections were capable of speaking the language of the majority of students. It was Chiyao for MH1 and MH2 schools while Chichewa was spoken by the classroom teachers of MH3 School. And with the existence of the On Distance Learning (ODL); a program that was introduced to help train teachers from local areas so as to have as many teachers who can speak the same language as the students’ mother language, it may be concluded that in Mangochi the policy is implemented and is good for quality education.

3. Summary of the Findings from Mangochi

In Mangochi the mother language of instruction is Chichewa for the first 4 years of primary education. Where students have problems understanding these Chichewa instructions, Chiyao is used. And for the rest of the primary cycle, Chichewa and English are the languages of instruction. In general, the stakeholders have positive attitudes towards this arrangement of making a switch at standard 5. This is the case mainly because it is believed that instructions in English are a good way of preparing the learners for further studies and better job opportunities

outside the students' district of birth. Instructions in Chichewa help prepare students for the national examination in the subject of Chichewa as well as opening up the communication options with people from language regions outside Mangochi. By using the vernacular during instruction, teachers help students understand the contents faster. Despite a marked indication that students have problems understanding instruction in English, they still desire to be taught in it. The majority of teachers also favor the use of English although with a lot of translations. Some teachers including the DEM wish to have English instructions throughout the primary cycle. Overall, the policy is being implemented with adaptations such as using a combination of Chichewa and Chiyao when teaching those students who are not yet fluent in Chichewa as well as making translation from English to Chichewa for the same reason.

4. Conclusion

The language of instruction policy in Malawi as examined from what is happening in primary schools in Mangochi has the potential to improve education quality. This is the case because the policy has given the teachers the opportunity to use students' mother tongue or translate difficult English concepts into the national local language for learners' comprehensions of lesson contents. In this case, quality education is limited to where actual learning is taking place. This can be observed from the students' indication that their home language was the same as the classroom language this means that students are able to participate fully during lessons. This is in actual fact, the reason behind formulation of the policy. However, the practice by teachers of suppressing the use of Chiyao in the school environment; the absence of teaching and learning materials written in Chiyao; and the lack of training for teachers specifically targeting Chiyao; is contrary to the rights based objective of the policy. Once these aspects are addressed, the policy can greatly contribute to the quality of education especially in cases such as the one mentioned of students failing to read Chichewa and English because they are typical Yao (from an interview with MH1 school teachers). Such students, through reinforcement of this policy could become literate in Chiyao which may lead to their literacy in the other languages such as Chichewa and English.

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