

How does the English only medium work in the classroom?

A Survey Report

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Background information

Malawi is a multilingual country with about 18 languages spoken within its borders (CLS 2010). There has never been any comprehensive language policy, not even a language policy in education, in the history of Malawi. Malawi has for a long time operated on directives as far as the language policy in education is concerned. For instance, in 1968, at the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) party convention it was directed that with immediate effect, Chichewa shall be the medium of instruction in lower primary school while the rest of the languages were only to be used as home languages (see also Kishindo 1998). The 1968 directive further recognised English as the official language while Chichewa would be the language of national unity as well as the semi-official language. To this day Chichewa is the only local language taught in schools as a subject of study. On 26 March, 1996 another directive was issued which directed that with immediate effect, learners in standards 1 - 4 be taught using their mother-tongue or vernacular languages while for standards 5 and above English shall remain a medium of instruction. The directive further stated that English and Chichewa would continue to be taught as subjects of study. The Ministry of education justified the policy directive by stating that research elsewhere has shown that learners learn better and faster when taught in their own mother-tongue (read familiar language) or vernacular languages in the first four years than when taught in the second language.

This directive received mixed reactions from various stakeholders ranging from lack of fact finding, lack of materials, to the policy leading to tribalism, among others. It was then realized that there was need to conduct language surveys and wide consultations in order to come up with a more comprehensive language policy in education for Malawi. The importance of having a clearly articulated language policy for pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education was also spelt out. As part of the data gathering process, the Centre for Language Studies at the University of Malawi conducted four sociolinguistic surveys with special reference to education on the following languages: Ciyawo, Citumbuka, Cilomwe and Cisená (CLS 1999). The main objective of these surveys was to determine the acceptability, relevance and practicality of using mother tongues/vernacular languages as media of instruction in Standards 1-4. The fact results showed that parents, guardians and teachers as well as communities had no problems with using their local languages in lower primary school as long as English and Chichewa were offered as subjects (CLS 1999). English and Chichewa are considered as languages of wider communication.

The 1996 language policy in education directive was never implemented. The criticisms levelled on this language in education policy led to the commencement of the process of development of a comprehensive draft language policy in education that would follow the basic procedures: consultation and fact finding, policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. The comprehensive draft language in education policy remains a draft, twenty years have passed.

The Malawi constitution states that every citizen has the right to use the language of their choice. Thus, the constitution of Malawi recognises the importance of Malawian languages. Malawi is also a signatory to several charters including the Cultural Charter for Africa, UNESCO that encourage the use of local languages as vehicles of teaching and learning especially in lower primary schools. Benefits of using a local language of instruction as evidenced by pilot studies (e.g. Language Across the Curriculum (LAC) and Malawi Breakthrough to Literacy (MBTL)) include the following: better performance among learners, reduced repetition rates, reduced dropout rates and increased learners' participation during lessons (Langer 2013, Chilora 2004, Mchazime and Tiede 2007, MoEST 2007, Williams 1998).

Introduction

Despite the huge resource and time investments made towards the preparation of a draft language policy in education that prioritises the child's familiar language as a medium of instruction, the Malawi government decided on the English only instruction in 2013 (Malawi Government, 2013 education act, section 78(i)). Thus, the act does not give any room for the use of any local language as media of instruction. The education act came at the time when Malawi had been gearing towards expanding the use of familiar language in the classroom, that is from using Chichewa only in lower primary throughout Malawi to including other local languages in places where Chichewa is not a familiar language. The use of Chichewa medium instruction in lower primary schools throughout the country dates back to the 1968 Malawi Congress Party Convention. Prior to this convention, other Malawian languages such as Citumbuka were used as medium of instruction starting from the colonial era. Several arguments, debates and experiments in support of a familiar language of instruction have been made (Langer 2013, Chilora 2004, Mchazime and Tiede 2007, Williams

1998). The pilot studies confirmed the benefits of using familiar languages in the lower primary school, including the fact that learners learn a second language better if they achieve literacy in a familiar language. Like the previous language policies in education, the current policy only exists as a single isolated statement within the 2013 education act, without any further articulation or implementation plan, among other things. Six years after its enactment, it was worth finding out how the English only instruction, as stipulated in the act, is being implemented in the classroom. Particularly, we wanted to find out if the English only instruction is being implemented, how it is being implemented as well as opportunities and challenges being faced by learners and educators in the implementation of the policy. This report presents the findings.

Study objectives.

The main objective of the study was to find out how the 2013 English only medium of instruction is being implemented in the classroom.

The following were the specific objectives:

- To find out the language of instruction employed in the classroom in primary schools
- To find out the languages used to develop teaching and learning materials
- To discuss opportunities and challenges affecting the implementation of the English only policy

Methodology

The present study was qualitative by design. The study employed a number of data collection techniques including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews. Class teachers, learners, head teachers and Primary Education Advisors were interviewed. A team of four language researchers visited eight schools in two districts, Mangochi and Nsanje. The two districts were purposively sampled because of their linguistic make up. Mangochi is a predominantly Ciyawo speaking district, where it is possible to find learners coming to school for the first time that lack or have limited knowledge of Chichewa or English. In Mangochi, two schools from strictly Ciyawo speaking communities were sampled plus two other schools from mixed communities (Ciyawo and Chichewa). Nsanje district is predominantly Cisena

speaking, where it is possible to find learners coming to school for the first time that lack or have limited knowledge of Chichewa or English. Out of the four schools in Nsanje district, two were from typical rural areas where only Cisená language was predominant. The other two were of semi-urban nature where native speakers of Cisená and non-native speakers were learning in the same class. The sampled schools were informed in advance about our intended visits through the District Education Manager's (DEM) office.

Guidelines for lesson observation, key informant interviews and semi-structured interviews were prepared in advance, see appendix. The interviews were conducted in English, Chichewa and Ciyawo in Mangochi. In Nsanje the interviews were mostly conducted in English, Chichewa and Cisená. The interviewers and interviewees were trans-languaging, mixing English, Chichewa and Ciyawo or mixing English, Chichewa and Cisená. Lessons were observed in Standards 1 to 4 in the infant and junior sections. In addition, we also observed some lessons in the senior sections to appreciate how English was being used as a medium of instruction. In the senior section, only standards 5 to 7 participated as we did not want to disturb the standard 8 learners who were busy preparing for end of primary school national examinations.

The research team paid a courtesy call to the DEM's office to explain the objectives of their visits to the schools and to seek clearance from the office. The DEM's office was also crucial in helping to identifying the schools that met the linguistic requirement. After getting clearance from the DEM, the team proceeded to PEAs office and then schools, through the headteachers, where they explained the objectives of their visit to the school and sought clearance from the headteacher. The researchers also sought clearance from the class teachers and explained to the learners the purpose of their visit. Head teachers and PEAs were considered key informants in this study. These were interviewed after lesson observation and after learners and teachers were interviewed.

Lessons of the following subjects were observed:

- i) Mathematics,
- ii) Life Skills,
- iii) Bible Knowledge
- iv) Religious Studies,
- v) Social Studies
- vi) Expressive Arts

vii) English

viii) Agriculture etc

Research Results

Language of instruction in the classroom

Lesson observations and structured interviews revealed that the English only instruction is yet to be implemented. For standards 1-4, lessons were mainly delivered in Chichewa. In Mangochi district, in standards 1-2 the lessons were being delivered in Chichewa, but Ciyawo was heavily used to explain concepts and give instructions to learners. In semi-urban areas, lessons were also delivered in Chichewa while trans-languaging between Ciyawo and Chichewa. In most cases, teachers had to repeat what was said in Chichewa in Ciyawo for other learners to react to instructions. Similarly, in Nsanje, lessons were delivered in Chichewa while trans-languaging between Cisena and Chichewa. In some cases, teachers had to repeat what they said in Chichewa in Cisena. When asked why they were repeating the lessons or instructions in the child's language, they responded that it was because most learners could not understand Chichewa as it is not their familiar language. In semi-urban settings, they had to continue switching between the local language and Chichewa since some learners were unable to understand Chichewa while others could not understand Ciyawo in the case of Mangochi or Cisena in the case of Nsanje. Thus, even the Chichewa instruction in lower primary school and English only instruction in senior primary school were not being adhered to.

One of the consistent teaching and learning method we encountered during lesson observation was pair or group work where the learners were given tasks to accomplish in pairs or groups. The group members needed to discuss a question or some solve a given problem together. When the learners were instructed to work in pairs or groups, it was observed that most learners made such discussions in their familiar languages, i.e. Ciyawo in Mangochi and Cisena in Nsanje. The same applies to responding to questions during lessons, some learners responded using their native language.

In standards 5-8 lessons were mainly delivered in English. However, the teachers could translanguage between English and Chichewa and sometimes a local language of the area. We observed that the learners in the senior primary section had difficulties with the English only instruction. A majority of them could not express themselves in English. Their spellings during

group work reports were not so good. Some of them preferred to respond to questions using their familiar language. During group discussions, majority were using Chichewa or their native languages.

Translanguaging in the classroom

Essentially, three languages interact in the classroom. It was interesting to observe how the three languages were being used. One particular case in point was observed in a remote area in Nsanje where a lesson was being delivered in Chichewa but for most of the lesson whenever learners were asked to mention something they said it in their local dialect of Cisena. For example, when the teacher asked the learners to name some natural resources found in their area, learners mentioned Cisena names such as *mataka* (soil), *chipili* (snake) *nyamunyamu* (edible wasp), *nkhangayiwa* (dove), *nkhonokono* (snail). All these things have different names in Chichewa and the learners only mentioned Cisena names because that is what they knew. Interestingly, while the learners understood what the teachers was teaching and asking them to mention, they expressed their knowledge in the language they knew and understood. Clearly, the learners only knew the concepts in their language. However, probably bound by the government policy to teach in Chichewa, whenever the learners mentioned a Cisena name, the teacher repeated it by giving a Chichewa equivalent. For example, when a pupil said *mataka* (soil), the teacher said *eya, dothi* (yes, soil). While the teacher fell short of telling the learners they were wrong, repeating the answers in a different language, Chichewa put some learners off as they thought they had given wrong answers. However, it also helped the learners know the equivalents in Chichewa thereby enriching their Chichewa vocabulary.

At some point during the same lesson, when the teacher raised his book to show the learners a drawing, some learners were overheard speaking in their language Cisena “**Ife tikuona tayi**” meaning “We cannot see from here”. The teacher responded by raising it further high. It was clear the teacher understood the learner’s language but was not willing to use or reinforce it during the delivery of the lesson. Similarly, the learners were eager to communicate with their teacher but only in the language they understood. It was clear that there was a missing link between the teacher and the learners, which was a common language. The teacher stated that he not aware of the English only policy, but was only aware of the policy that stipulates that Chichewa is the language of instruction from Standard 1 to 4 and English from Standard 5 to 8. He also acknowledged that the majority (about 95%) of the learners in his class as well as at the whole school were Cisena

speakers and only learned Chichewa at school. It was therefore, clear that while the teachers understood the dilemma the learners were in with regard to the language of the classroom, teachers were bound by the policy to use Chichewa other than a local language or indeed English.

A contrasting case was found at a more urban school in the same district, where a teacher delivering a lesson in English in one of the senior classes, was able to clarify some concepts in the local language, Cisená whenever she noticed that the learners did not understand the English. For example, in a lesson about ‘Communication’, the teacher asked the class, “What do you understand by the word ‘Communication?’ When the class was silent, she translated it into Chichewa, **‘Mukamva zoti Communication, mumati ndi chiyani?’**. Additionally, in the course of the lesson, the teacher kept switching from English to Chichewa and Cisená. For example, as an example of ‘traditional means of communication’, the teacher translated into Cisená **“giving a black chicken to the chief”** as **“kwenda kwa mfumu kukapereka nkhuku yotchena”**. In this case, although the policy stipulates that English is the medium of instruction in Standard 6, the teacher understood the learners’ linguistic background and ensured that she communicated to them in the language they easily understood while also using the official language, English.

It was also observed that during many of the lessons, that when learners were asked to do pair or group work, in both the Ciyawo and Cisená speaking areas, they conducted their discussions in their local languages. In this case, while they discussed in their local language, they had to write the answers in Chichewa as required by the policy. In some cases, however, it was discovered that the learners took more time to discuss and decide what was the Chichewa equivalent for the answer that had been agreed upon in their local language.

Although the focus of the study was to see if English was being used as a medium of instruction in the lower classes, we decided to observe a lesson where English was being taught, as a subject, in standard 4 in Mangochi. English as a subject is supposed to be taught in English from Standards 1 to 8 just like Chichewa as a subject is taught in Chichewa from Standard 1 to 8. However, in this lesson that we decided to observe in Mangochi, we discovered that the teacher combined both English and Chichewa in teaching English as a subject. Some extracts from the lesson: Okay, can

you open your books on page 103. *Titsekule mabuku athuwo patsamba 103* (let us open our books on page 103). "*eya ndi mmene timanenera muja kuti* (as we already said earlier that) ...Exclamation mark *ndi zizindikiro zosonyeza kuti munthu akudabwa* (exclamation marks are signs that indicate that someone is astonished)." "*Tikuona kuti mau ooh ndi mau osonyeza kuti munthu akudabwa* (We can see that the word ooh indicates that someone is astonished)"

Thus, we can see that the teacher was using both English and Chichewa during the lesson. The teacher would say something or read a sentence in English, then they would later rephrase it in Chichewa for the benefit of the learners.

In another school in Mangochi, in a standard 6 Geography lesson, the teacher used English throughout the lesson. However, during an interview later, the teacher revealed that he had only used English because of the presence of the researchers and that after that lesson, some learners had come to ask him to explain what he had been teaching in English as they had not understood anything. The teacher explained that he normally uses Chichewa to explain concepts that he has presented in English to help the learners understand better. This clearly supports the philosophy behind the use of a local/mother language as a medium of instruction as it enables learners to easily understand and relate the concepts they learn. It was, therefore, evident that some teachers understand the language challenges learners go through and were willing to do anything to ensure that their learners understand what they teach.

In a Mathematics lesson in Standard 5 in Nsanje, where the teacher only used English for instruction, there was clear detachment between the teacher and the learners. The teacher had given the learners Maths problems to solve in groups and asked them to later present before the whole class. As some learners made their presentation, they used a combination of Chichewa and Cisená. For example, in presenting a division Maths problem, one pupil said **5 tichose zero** (we deduct 0 from 5), another said **15 alowe mu 44 (15 should go into 44) 4 tichose 1** (4 minus 1) at which point the teacher intervened and corrected the pupil to say **4 minus 1**. In addition, when the teacher asked **where do we put 2?** The learners responded in Chichewa "**pa 4**" (on 4). It was clear that while the teacher was trying to follow the English instruction policy in standard 5, the learners had not mastered the English language enough to effectively communicate and thus preferred to engage in the local language.

Awareness of the English only instruction policy

The survey results also revealed that there is lack of policy awareness among the major stakeholders such as learners and teachers. Apparently, no official communication was sent to schools informing them about the English only instruction as contained in the 2013 education act. In addition to addressing the issue of awareness of the existence of the Education Act 2013, during interviews some teachers explained that they only got a hint about the English only language of instruction policy through the National Reading Programme (NRP) trainings where they were told that English was the language of instruction. Through the interviews with teachers, head teachers and PEAs we learned that teachers were instructed to start implementing the English only medium when the National Reading Program (NRP) was just being rolled out. However, when this was tried, there were some challenges. Some teachers reported that when they started implementing the policy, learners would just stare at them and eventually start absenting themselves from school. According one of the teachers interviewed had this to say,

“We tried [implementing the English only instruction] when we just started NRP curriculum. You would just come into the class and start teaching in English only- the introduction, then activities. pupils would just stare at you. It was like you are teaching only yourself. Later on, when we went back, we told them about our experiences. Even when teaching English, the pupils just memorise things without understanding.”

When the issue was reported back to the NRP implementors, the teachers were instructed to revert to the usual policy where Chichewa, alongside the local languages is the language of instruction for the junior classes, and English alongside Chichewa for the senior classes are used. It is clear that learners cannot master literacy skills or learn concepts in a language they are not familiar with.

In some cases, the learners just memorise words or concepts without understanding. In most cases, when the researchers entered the classrooms for the lesson observation activity, learners would stand up and recite the greetings even before being greeted. They would go ‘Good morning, sir. How are you? We are very well, thank you. Sit down.’ Then they would sit down even before being asked to sit down.

During interviews, head teachers and class teachers also conceded that many stakeholders including themselves had not been communicated to about the new education act. In as far as the language of instruction policy was concerned, they were supposed to be teaching in Chichewa in Standards 1, 2, 3 and 4 and switch to English from Standard 5 to 8. For example, in an interview with a head teacher in Mangochi on what is the current policy on the language of instruction in primary schools, they said that what they knew was that the policy was that Chichewa was the medium of instruction for standards 1 to 4. They also further explained that in addition to using Chichewa as a medium of instruction, a local language in which the learners are familiar with can be used to clarify some concepts. The use of a local familiar language, they explained, helps learners to learn from the known to the unknown. They also reasoned that the use of a familiar language helps to establish a good rapport between the teacher and learners and motivates learners to remain in school.

Teachers and learners' attitudes towards the English only instruction

There is a mismatch between the teachers' and learners' justification for translanguaging between English or Chichewa and a familiar local language and their attitudes towards the English only instruction. Interestingly, when we asked the teachers and learners their views about the English only instruction, some teachers were of the view that the English only instruction policy should be implemented immediately. This is contradictory considering that the same teachers were saying that they included the child's native language during lessons in order to facilitate learning. They were of the view that if learners use the English medium right from standard 1 to 8, they would get used and be given enough opportunity to practise English. These findings suggest that the teachers and learners attribute poor English language skills among the learners in upper primary school to the Chichewa medium of instruction.

It is also worth mentioning that although the teachers support the use of English as a medium of instruction from standard 1, the standard of English among some teachers was not always good. In many cases the teachers pronounced English words with distinct Chichewa or Ciyawo and Cisená accents. For example, the absence of **r** sound in the Chichewa language was evident in the pronunciation of English such as **colle**ction instead of **cor**rection.

Opportunities and challenges in the implementation of the English only instruction

The research team also wanted to find out if there were any opportunities or challenges associated with the English only instruction. In this section we report on the perceived opportunities and challenges associated with the English only instruction policy. We start by looking at the perceived opportunities and then the challenges.

Perceived opportunities

One of the opportunities is the fact that some teaching and learning materials are already in English. For examples, teachers' guides and lesson plans for standards 1-4 are already in English for all the subjects except Chichewa and for standard 5 -8, the materials are already in English. With the Chichewa instruction, teachers have to prepare a lesson in English using an English teacher's guide but they have to deliver that lesson in Chichewa for the infant and junior classes. At the same time, they have to refer to Chichewa learner's books. Thus, an English only instruction would not require them to translate from English into Chichewa while the lesson is in progress. So, it's easier to use the materials that are already in English. Thus, they don't have to translate the teacher's guides and lessons into a local language. The policy is part of the education act and was supported by government. Thus, if there was any political will, then it would be easier to develop teaching and learning materials in line with the policy.

Through the interviews, it was found that the implementing stakeholders strongly believe that the English only instruction would enable learners to practise speaking and writing in English since it would be the only mode of communication in the classroom. In addition, national examinations are in English, thus the policy would help to prepare the candidates for the use of English only during the examinations at the end of primary schooling. Majority of teachers and learners believe that the English only instruction would provide an opportunity to expose learners right from standard 1 to get used to English, in terms of using and understanding the language. Thus, it is believed that using English medium helps the learners improve their English since learners get used to using English for communication. They argued that using local languages as medium of instruction does aid learning but it also makes learners think that they will always have an alternative to English, and they end up getting used to overuse of Chichewa or a local language

and end up failing national examinations or they fail to express themselves in English. Therefore, the English only instruction provides an opportunity to better one's English language skills. Much as this is perceived as an opportunity it disregards the teachers' justification for using the child's familiar as results of the study suggest, to aid learning and to reduce absenteeism. Learners give up or loose confidence when they cannot understand concepts.

Another opportunity is the existence of teacher development centres (TDCs) which provide opportunities for continuous professional development. According to the head teachers and PEAs, teachers would be assisted accordingly if the English only instruction was to be implemented. Ideally, this is a possibility but in practice there may be challenges. For the senior primary school, the learners are already exposed to English vocabulary. Thus, the English only instruction would not be a major challenge. However, lesson observation results have shown that teachers and learners still use Chichewa or a local language to aid the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Currently, according the teachers, using an English medium enables discipline the classroom as learners hardly comment or ask unnecessary questions. This When you use English, the class is usually very quiet. Thus, they think using English only instruction would reduce noise during lessons. This is however worrisome considering that learners learn better when they participate, when they can ask questions and comment. Therefore silence in the classroom is not always a positive sign.

Another perceived opportunity with the English only instruction has to do with teacher deployment. The government does not deploy teachers based on the languages that they speak. Any teacher can be deployed or transferred to any part of Malawi. Thus, with the English only policy, it was argued, teachers do not have to know the local language of the learner to teach at any school in the country. During the interviews, we learnt that some teachers had to learn the local language for the sake of their learners. The DEM and headteachers also stated that in some areas they have to allocate teachers who are familiar with child's language if learning is to take place, especially in standards 1 and 2.

Challenges associated with English only instruction

Despite the perceived opportunities described in the preceding subsection, there are several challenges that would surface with the English only instruction. The challenges were obtained through lesson observation in the senior primary section and by interviewing the teachers and learners whose classes were observed. One of the possible reasons for the lack of implementation of the English only instruction policy is that the Ministry of Education had not yet developed the teaching and learning materials in English to support the policy. Teachers were facing challenges to implement the English only instruction using materials that are in Chichewa, in the lower primary school. It is therefore surprising that the policy was put in place without considering or planning for development of materials necessary for implementing the policy.

Another challenge that was observed was the fact that teachers were inconsistent in the use of the language of instruction in senior primary school. Most of the teachers started the lesson in English but later trans-linguaged between English and Chichewa and in some cases a local language of the area. For example, the following was experienced at one school in Mangochi District:

So, what I want now, **m'magulu mmene mwakhalamo** (in the groups where you are seated),

I want you mukambirane kuti mmene chithunzi cha 'A', **amene angachite zimenezizi ndi achipembedzo chanji**(I want you to look at picture 'A' and discuss which religion can do that). *Are we together there?*

In another instance, the teacher said,

If you are through, raise a hand. **Ngati mwamaliza pagulu, mmodzi ayimike mkono. Osamangolankhula mwachisawawa.** (If you have finished, one person should raise a hand. Do not just speak disorderly.)

This shows that in classes where English is supposed to be the medium of instruction, some teachers code mix between English and Chichewa. This could be due to two reasons: First, it could be that the teachers doubt the capability of the learners to understand English. Secondly, it could be that the teacher him/herself is not proficient enough in English and thus resorts to the use of Chichewa in some instances.

In a standard 7 class which was observed in Nsanje District, the teacher managed to teach the whole lesson in English. This was during a Social and Environmental Studies and the topic was ‘Characteristics of Peoples of Africa’. Despite the fact that the whole lesson was taught in English, the teacher displayed a number of mistakes in some expressions such as:

- ‘Let us *discuss about* characteristics of peoples of Africa’ instead of ‘let us discuss the characteristics of peoples of Africa.’
- ‘You must write correct *spells*’ instead of ‘you must write correct spellings.’
- ‘Give us one answer a time. Do not *fast*’ instead of ‘give us one answer at a time. Do not be fast.’

When interviewed about challenges faced, most of the teachers indicated that it is difficult for learners to understand most of the concepts when taught in English only. In order to make sure that the content is understood, teachers have to take some time to explain the same things in Chichewa. At one school in Mangochi, the teacher taught the whole lesson in English in standard 6 but the learners were completely inactive. When the teacher was later interviewed on why this was the case, he gave the following explanation:

“When I say something in English, I usually explain it in Chichewa. Today they were surprised that I did not do this. Usually, when I am teaching through English, they stop me and say, ‘sir you have said this in English, can you also speak in Chichewa so that we should understand?’”

What happened on this day was that during the lesson, the teacher continued to use English because of the presence of the researcher and as a result, the learners were not only inactive, but also surprised that the lesson was not rephrased in Chichewa. Later, when the lesson had ended, some of the learners went to the teacher’s office and asked him to explain in Chichewa some of the issues that were explained during the lesson.

Out of the classes that were observed in the junior section, there was however one standard 1 teacher who used the English only medium when teaching Mathematics. When he was interviewed after the lesson, he indicated that just like the rest of the teachers that he was aware of the policy which requires one to use Chichewa as the language of instruction in lower primary school and English in the senior primary school. He was not aware of the English only instruction. Despite

that, he resorted to using English only instruction in standard 1 and went on to say that he chose to use English on his own conviction. The teacher also faced several challenges in this class such as learners' inability to understand instructions. For example, when the teacher said, 'let's be in pairs', the learners did not do any action and only went in pairs when he said *mukhale awiriawiri mukambirane* (be in pairs, discuss). In some cases, it was clear that the learners did understand the question but could not express themselves in English and so resorted to explaining in Chichewa. For instance, the teacher asked, 'Who can write *seven kwacha* on the board? Yes,' The learner who had raised up a hand went to the board and wrote '7K'. The teacher then asked the other learners: 'Is he right'? One learner responded: *wapotoza*, meaning 'he has transposed/reversed'. The teacher then asked by repeating '*mwati wapotoza?* (Are you saying he has transposed?) So, who can write *seven kwacha?*' Another learner went to the board and wrote 'K7'.

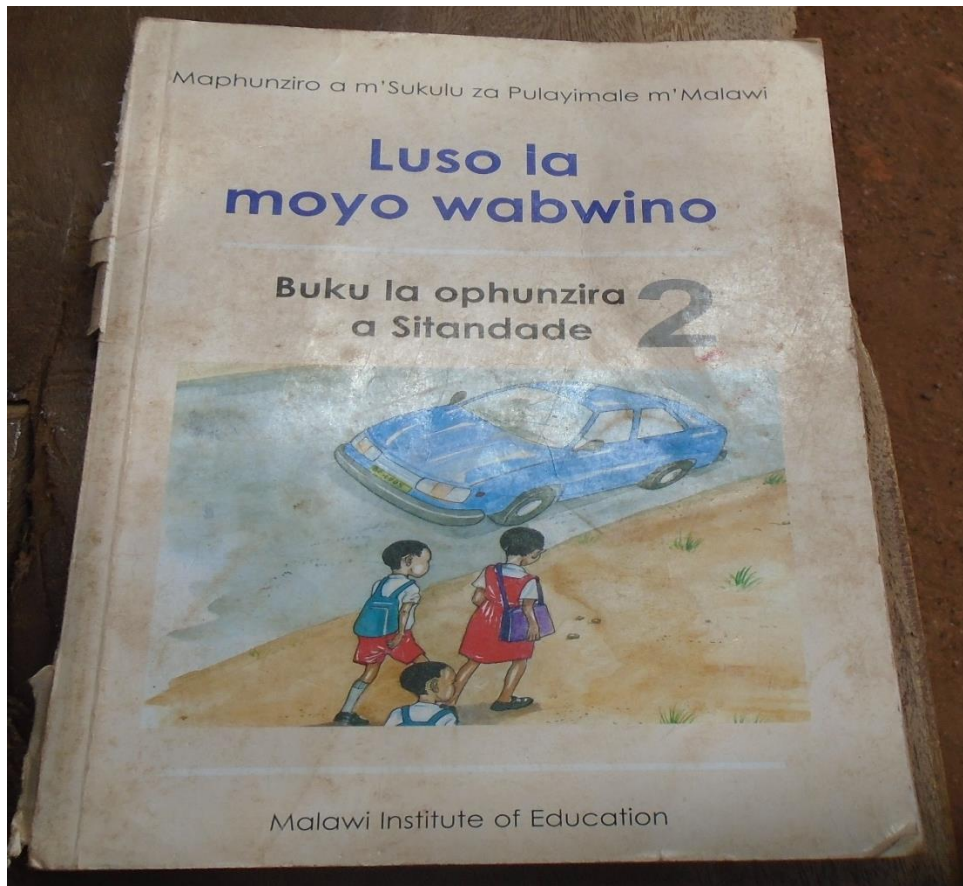
When the teacher was interviewed after the lesson, the teacher indicated that using the English only medium in a class like standard 1 has an advantage as the teacher finds it easy to teach in English because of the fact that the lesson plan prepared by the teacher is already in English. However, there are several challenges such as the following:

- Learners do not understand English because they are mostly fluent in the local language.
- Even though the teacher finds it easy to teach because of the fact that the lesson plan is in English, there are challenges regarding learners' books because they are in Chichewa so discussions revert to Chichewa even if instruction has been in English.

English only instruction and availability of teaching and learning materials

One of the objectives this study sought to achieve was to find out whether the teaching and learning materials are in line with the English only policy. To address this objective, observations and interviews. The interviews were conducted mainly with teachers and learners. All the teachers and learners interviewed said that learners' materials in lower primary (standard 1-4) are written in Chichewa except the ones used to teach and learn English. In the senior primary school (standards 5-8) are written in English except the ones used to learn Chichewa.

One of the subjects that learners learn in lower primary is life skills whose text is shown in the picture below:



Standard 2 Life Skills Pupil's Book

The cover of this book confirms that indeed the pupil's books were written in Chichewa. Everything on this cover is in Chichewa except the name of the institution that was responsible for preparing the materials, i.e. Malawi Institute of Education. This confirms what the teachers and learners said regarding the language in which pupil's learning materials are written in lower primary. But some teachers and head teachers were not happy with this practice arguing that it affected learners' performance as seen in the excerpt below.

“Yes, their books are written in Chichewa up there. I recall during my time we had everything written in English, and when teaching us mathematics the teacher would say for example times, multiply by. They were using these terms not **kuphatikiza**. I knew plus in

standard 1 and 2. But this time if you ask a learner 2 plus 4, they would not give you an answer. I asked about 20 learners in my class, standard 7 they all failed and I asked a standard 5 pupil who wrote 6. The pupil knew the plus sign. So the instruction or approaches we have been given to implement on the learners are somehow difficult to be put into practice because of the books. The books are oversimplified.”

(Field notes: 22/03/19)

Unlike the pupil’s books all the teachers and head teachers interviewed said that all the teacher’s guides for lower primary except for Chichewa were written in English. They noted that in most cases the learners’ books do not have the details required for some of the activities they do in class. They said that such information is provided in the teacher’s guide. But the mismatch in terms of the language used in pupil’s books and the teacher’s guides appeared to bring some challenges to teachers especially when it came to lesson planning and delivery. The respondents described this situation as both challenging and confusing as noted in the extract below.

“That’s it, you would find a teacher writing a lesson plan in English following the teacher’s guide. However, he is going to deliver that lesson in class by translating it into Chichewa following the learner’s book and this is confusing. This is a challenge. The preparation and the pupil’s books should have been in the same language. ”

(Field notes: 21/03/19)

Both teachers and head teachers found this situation challenging because the teachers are “doing two things at the same time. They write their lesson plans in English and when they teach they translate what they prepared into Chichewa” since they “have to follow the learner’s book”
(Field notes:22/03/19).

At the same time the respondents found the situation confusing because “the mathematics and all other pupil’s books except for English for standard 1 up to 4 are written in Chichewa but in the teacher’s guides all the instructions are always in English. So, we are saying what should we follow?” (Field notes: 22/03/19).

Due to the perceived challenges and confusion both the teachers and the head teachers suggested that the teaching and learning materials should be written in the same language. They said that

doing so would help them do their work properly because at the moment “...the instruction or approaches we have been given to implement in the learners are somehow difficult to be put into practice because of the books.” (Field notes: 22/03/19).

Conclusion and recommendations

To summarise, results of this study inform us that the English only instruction is yet to be implemented, just like the 1996 mother-tongue policy directive. The 1968 language in education policy which stipulates that Chichewa is the language of instruction from standard 1 - 4 and English is the language of instruction from standard 5 and above, is still being used. However, even this policy is not fully being implemented as evidenced by the presence of Ciyawo and Cisena in the classroom. Classroom observation as well interviews suggest that using a familiar language of instruction is beneficial to learners. This is the reason teachers try as much as possible to include a learner’s familiar language, Ciyawo in Mangochi district and Cisena in Nsanje district. The fact that teachers and learners still bring local languages into the senior primary section where English should be the medium, to aid learning, points to the importance of using familiar languages in the classroom.

The results also show that despite the enactment of the English only instruction which is part of the 2013 education act, materials to support the policy are yet to be developed. In addition to that, the major stakeholders, teachers and learners are not aware of this policy.

Looking at the opportunities and challenges associated with the English only, there is outright contradiction in the responses from the participating teachers and learners. They opine that using English only would provide an opportunity for learners to improve their language skills. At the same time, they recognise the challenge of an English only instruction, the fact that learners are not familiar with English. Thus, learners may understand what is being taught if they do not understand the language.

The study makes several recommendations. The first recommendation has to do with capacity building among teachers with the goal of improving the teaching and learning of English as a second language. Perhaps, the best way to advocate for use of mother-tongue is to improve the

teaching of English as a second language such that by the end of year 4 or 5, learners should be able to express themselves in English. The current state of affairs mistakenly put the blame on a local language of instruction for poor English language skills among learners.

We further recommend a national wide study on the implementation of the English only medium as only two districts were sampled in this study due to funding and time limitations. In the national wide, we recommend inclusion of parents and communities as key informants from the communities to have a better understanding of language issues at home and at school. Lastly, we recommend the inclusion of language policy issues in the teacher education curriculum. Majority of teachers could not make a clear distinction between a language being studied as a subject and a language that is a medium of instruction. Thus, including such content would help them understand better the concept of language of instruction.

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Appendix



ASSESSMENT OF USE OF ENGLISH AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN MALAWI PRIMARY SCHOOLS

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR LEARNERS' INTERVIEWS

1. What language do you use most at home?
2. What language do you use most at school?
3. What language do you use most in the classroom?
4. What language do you use most to communicate with your teachers when you are learning subjects such as:
 - (a) R/Education
 - (b) Mathematics
 - (c) Life Skills
 - (d) Needlecraft
 - (e) Social Studies
 - (f) English
5. Which English language skill do you use most in the classroom?
 - (a) Listening
 - (b) Speaking

(c) Reading

(d) Writing

6. How would you describe your English-speaking abilities?
(Test this by engaging the pupil: in a dialogue e.g. What did you eat for breakfast this morning?)
7. How do you describe your English-reading abilities?
(Test this by giving the pupil a short paragraph to read. Please, can you read this sentence for me?)
8. How do you describe your English writing abilities?
(Test this by dictating to the pupil a sentence to write. Can you please write this sentence for me?)
9. In what language(s) are your mathematics, life skills, general studies and religious education books written?
10. Is the understanding of the subjects the class is taught affected in any way by the language used to communicate with you in class? Explain
11. How are you assisted when you fail to understand the lessons due to the language employed in class?
12. How often does this happen?
13. What challenges if any, do you face when learning using English as a medium of instruction?
14. How has the language of instruction affected your performance in class?
15. Are you aware that you are required to use English to learn all subjects except Chichewa?
16. What are the opportunities that come with using English only as a language of instruction?
17. What are the challenges that you encounter in using the English only medium of instruction?



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ASSESSMENT OF USE OF ENGLISH AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN MALAWI PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Classroom Observation Guide

School: _____ Class: _____ District: _____

Subject:

Observer:

Date: _____ Time: _____

1. Observe teacher's use of English/local language when delivering the lesson. In particular, observe the following:

- Pronunciation of English words
- teacher's confidence in using English
- Code switching and code mixing (English and local language)
- Whether the teacher reads in English and explains in a local language
- Use of a local language as medium of instruction
- Record specific terms used in class, both in English and local language
- Any translation techniques employed
- Any re-enforcement techniques employed
- Instances where teacher employs code switching/mixing, translation and other techniques

- Effect of local language on English (eg pronunciation) [L1 influence?]
- Observe teaching materials (language used) check classroom walls
- Instances of dialogue with learners

Observe learners' use of English/Local language

- Pronunciation of English words-
- Students' confidence in using English
- Understanding/misunderstanding of English words
- Responses in English/Local language – oral and written
- Use of English/Local language in group discussions
- Use of English/Local language when asking questions
- Effect of local language on English (eg pronunciation, lexicon)
- Class participation in the teaching and learning activities
- instances of dialogue among themselves or with teacher



ASSESSMENT OF USE OF ENGLISH ONLY AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN MALAWI PRIMARY SCHOOLS

School: _____ **Zone**

District:

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PEAs and HEADTEACHERS.

1. What is the current policy regarding the language of instruction in primary schools?

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2. What are the objectives of this policy?

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3. Are you aware of the English only medium of instruction as stipulated in the 2013 education act?.....

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4. What are the opportunities that come with the English only medium of instruction?

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5. What are the challenges encountered by teachers and learners in implementing the English only medium of instruction?

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6. What is your role in the implementation of this policy?

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7. When teaching, do teachers use English throughout the lesson? YES.....NO.....

8. If YES, what effect does this have on the learners?

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9. If NO, what languages do teachers use when teaching?

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10. Why do they use these languages?

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11. What effect does the use of these languages have on the learners?

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TEACHERS interview guidelines

1. What language do you use most outside the classroom?
2. Section 78 of the Education Act spells out the medium of instruction in schools in Malawi, are you aware of this policy?
3. What does it say?
4. Where did you get this information?
1. What language do you use to teach subjects such as Maths, General Studies Life Skills etc?
2. How describe your learners' English-speaking abilities?
3. How do you describe your learners' English-reading abilities?
4. How do you describe your learners' English writing abilities?
5. How do you describe your learners' understanding of lessons taught in English?
6. What strategies do you employ to help your learners overcome the language barrier if any so that they understand the content taught using English?
7. How do you cope with the fact that the language of instruction is not your learners' most familiar language?
8. Did you receive any training/orientation for the use of English as a medium of instruction in lower primary?
9. What challenges do you face, if any, in using English to teach learners various subjects?
10. Are there any guidelines that help you implement the policy of using English as a medium of instruction? What do they say?
11. What major challenges if any do your learners face when learning using English as a medium of instruction?

12. From your experience as a teacher, has the learners' English language abilities improved, dwindled, or remained the same since the English only medium of instruction was adopted? What is the evidence?
13. From your experience as a teacher, has the learners' performance in other subjects improved, dwindled, or remained the same since the English only medium of instruction was adopted? What is the evidence?
14. Are the learners' learning materials written in the same language as the one that is used for instruction?
15. If not, how do you handle this situation?
16. Does this situation affect your lesson delivery in any way?
17. What monitoring mechanisms are there to ensure that the policy is being implemented?
18. Have you been subjected to any of these mechanisms?
19. Did you receive any feedback?
20. If yes, how useful to you was such feedback?