

**The effect of English-only instruction on skill formation and labour market readiness of young Malawians: First wave of evidence gathering and dialogue between experts and stakeholders: The reality of capacity constraints in Malawian education: What options are feasible?**

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## **Abbreviations**

CLS	Centre for Language Studies
MIE	Malawi Institute of Education
MTI	Mother Tongue Instruction
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
UNESCO	United Nations Education and Scientific Organisation

## 1.0 Introduction

The successful implementation of the use of local languages as medium of instruction in any country depends on capacity readiness of the Ministry of Education and other concerned stakeholders. This research project sought to identify and appreciate capacity constraints if the Ministry of Education in MoEST were to consider the adoption of local languages as medium of instruction in Schools and Colleges. Furthermore, it explored opportunities that exist that can facilitate multilingual education. In the context of Malawi, language policy in education has been ambiguous and constantly shifted over time. Prior to independence in 1964 during the missionary and colonial phase, local languages were adopted as medium of instruction. After the independence phase, Chichewa<sup>1</sup> was imposed as medium of instruction alongside English in school at the expense of other local language to facilitate the process of national building. It is to critical understand this development within the political context that prevailed. This was a period of one party rule and adoption of language policy was beyond question. After multiparty democracy was ushered in 1993, government language began to change. In 1996 MoEST issued a government circular to the effect that instruction for lower class should be in local language. This directive was not materially and technically supported. Hence policy implementation was left to the discretion of teachers in the field. This happened when the country had embraced political pluralism. In 2013, a key policy reversal occurred, the revised Education Act of 2013, Section 78(1) stated “The medium of instruction in all Schools and College shall be English” and 78(2) gives the Minister power to prescribe the language of instruction in school by way of gazetting. This represented a policy volte-face placing earlier policy directions in disarray. However, practice and policy are at variance.

The above language policy dilemma and reversals notwithstanding the quality of Education remains compromised. Basic education is characterised with high repetition, failure and school dropout rates, overcrowding and poor teacher qualifications (Mwamba and Mgonezulu, 2014). While this could be attributed to many factors including; high teacher: learner ratio and lack of teaching resources among others. The medium of instruction could be one key factor.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1968 Chichewa was declared national language

## **1.1 Research questions**

The study is directed by the following questions:

1. What opportunities exist with Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and supporting institutions that could facilitate the use of local languages as medium for instruction in schools?
2. What constraints could affect the successful adoption of local language as medium of instruction in Malawi?

Guided by the above broad questions, this study sought to assess the capacity readiness of the Ministry of Education to implement a familiar language policy in schools. It also sought to bring out what could be perceived as constraints in the implementation of a multilingual policy in education.

## **2.0 Review of related literature**

This section briefly explores academic literature on the role of local languages, challenges associated with the adoption of local languages as medium of instruction.

### **2.1 The role of local languages**

Mother tongue education has been found to be critical in improving the quality of education. It has been argued that the use both local languages and English in schools has a bearing on the development of country (UNESCO, 2015). The use of mother tongue-based education allows learners to use a language they are familiar with before being exposed to any other language which is actually foreign to them.

The other important argument for implementing the mother tongue- based education is that the inclusive and quality education is assured (UNESCO, 2014). As the language(s) used is/are familiar to learners, then this implies that almost all individuals coming from different familial statuses are given the chance to attain education as it could not be the case when other languages which are foreign are being used since they would not be able to grasp in the language unfamiliar to them which would make the school enrolment rate to decrease thereby affecting education negatively as only those children from well to do backgrounds would have that chance of grasping the things being taught hence affecting education which could consequently affect development in the world as nations would have only a few individuals who attained a quality education, so few rendering development to many becomes a problem,

so mother tongue based- education tries to solve all those challenges that the use of one foreign language(English) has on education and then on international development (Ouzo, 2018).

It has also been found that using mother tongue in schools, in particular, primary schools enables children to acquire some essential skills that they would apply to learn new languages as these skills develop in them, they might hardly find it a challenge in the near future when new languages like English are introduced to them as those skills attained from their own mother tongues would help them connect words in new languages thereby improving the quality of education.

## **2.2 Challenges associated with the introduction of local languages as medium of instruction in schools**

One of the hurdles to deal with when trying to introduce local languages as medium of instruction is the lack support from both parents and teachers. These primary stakeholders argue that children to get acquainted in both English writing and speaking, they need to be taught in English (Skutnabb, 2000). English is used worldwide and is perceived to be superior language of all the languages spoken in different societal backgrounds (Dijet, 2008).

## **3.0 Research approach**

The study adopted a qualitative approach to allow the researcher to engage with key decision makers, linguists and education experts within Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and other relevant institutions on the feasibility of adopting local languages as medium of instruction in Malawi. A qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Cresswell, 2013). The following were purposively identified as key informants; Directors of DIAS, Basic Education, Executive Director of MANEB, Director of MIE, Deans of School of Education (CC), Faculty of Education (Zuni), Faculty of Education, Research Director, Catholic University and Director of Teacher Education. The researcher shared a written interview schedule with the respondents. The interview schedule provided the purpose of the study and informed the prospective respondents of his or her right to participate or not. Data collected was analyzed thematically in relation to guiding research questions.

#### **4.0 Discussion of Findings**

This section presents a discussion of main findings highlighting how different stakeholders perceived the use of local languages, role of stakeholders, opportunities and constraints.

##### **4.1 Perception on the use of local languages as medium of instruction in schools**

Stakeholders had positive views on the use of local language as a medium of instruction in schools. There was general acceptance on the use of local language for instruction among different stakeholders. Among the stakeholders, one key linguist observed that:

“This issue has been debated for a long time and settled. Through research and UNESCO declaration of 1953<sup>2</sup>, a conclusion has been reached that a child best learns in their own language especially in the early formative years of education. This does not apply to Malawi only but in most developed countries the home language is also the language or medium of instruction in schools. Source A

Another expert expressed somewhat positive attitude towards the use of local language as a medium of instruction, cited;

“As Malawi Institute of Education, we have made moves in the past to promote use of local languages in lower primary school. We think there is overwhelming evidence that learners learn well in the language they fully understand. For the colleges, English remains the key medium of instruction especially in the formal institutions such as Universities and colleges.” Source B

It was argued that learners will have only one barrier to overcome. The use of English means that learners have two barriers to overcome, a foreign language and the content.

Stakeholders also observed that apart from educational reasons, MTI is one way of preserving our languages and cultures and identity as Malawians and Africans. The use of local languages can raise the status of local languages and improve communication between experts in various fields and the masses they claim to serve at district, regional or/and national levels. One of the expert reported that;

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<sup>2</sup> The benefits of mother tongue-based education were given prominence by the publication of UNESCO's (1953) *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*.

“Local languages as medium of instruction are important in schools and colleges. Their importance extends to the larger society because languages are more than modes of communication. Language is about knowledge production and social participation. When social discourse is conducted in a familiar language, people participate and contribute more. They become invested in the process. There is no developed country in the world whose children use a language foreign to them. They learn foreign languages as part of the curriculum, but they acquire knowledge in their own language which helps them learn better and more deeply. This also leads them to participating in the development of their society. Local languages promote democratic participation and empowerment of the people” Source D

In general, the study found that stakeholders considered the of local languages as medium of instruction would have positive dividends at personal, community and national level.

#### **4.2 Local languages and attainment of learning outcomes**

Stakeholders argued that the adoption of local languages as medium of instruction would results into the attainment of learning outcomes. One of the stakeholders, a linguist resented the use of foreign language such as English as a medium of instruction in the excerpt below:

Where a foreign language is imposed on a concept in Maths and other subjects, the child’s cognitive development is challenged to learn the language they do not know at all and learn new concepts they have not known before. Source A

Another stakeholder acknowledged the role of the local language in improving the attainment of learning outcomes and classroom in the following lines:

Use of local languages makes it easy for learners to understand the content and participate in the

classroom. This leads to improved class performance, self-esteem, and confidence. Beyond learning outcomes, it also deepens the knowledge production process because languages develop with wider use

From the above excerpts, it can be deduced that the adoption of local language as medium of instruction would improve the attainment of learning outcomes.

### **4.3 Opportunities for the adoption of local languages as medium of instruction**

The study found that there exist a number of opportunities that if well exploited can be used to facilitate the adoption of languages as medium of instruction. In the section, I isolate a few institutions that have the potential of supporting of MTI.

#### **4.3.1 The role of MIE supporting the Language policy**

The Malawi Institute of Education is a national body mandated to develop curriculum for basic, secondary and tertiary education for the Ministry of Education. MIE has the potential to play a strategic role in facilitating the adoption of local language as media of instruction in Malawi. One key curriculum expert observed that:

MIE is keen to implement a local languages policy through development of instructional materials. However, MIE would have wanted to have local languages, not only Chichewa because Malawi has over 16 languages. To this effect, when MIE was reforming the primary school curriculum from 2001, we attempted to convince MoEST to open up to other languages and Centre for Language Studies came into play to establish linguistic map for Malawi so that we could develop textbooks in more than one languages. This effort was frustrated by some officials in MOEST and the initiative did not go far. We also developed a language in education policy to that effect with CLS. MIE would have wanted to hire language specialists in those other languages to develop materials in those other languages. Source B

It is evident that MIE as an institution is ready to facilitate the adoption of the local languages as medium of instruction in schools. However, political support is missing and hence policy direction is ambiguous.

The curriculum expert acknowledged that as an institution MIE need support to implement MTI policy:

MIE has the capacity depending on the need. We have English, Chichewa and French specialists. If other languages were approved, we would recruit the officers for MIE. So, we are capable depending on the nature of curriculum that we have”. Source B

In view of the above, while MIE is ready to support MTI it need to build a human resource capacity.

#### **4.3.2 Role of Centre for Language Studies (CLS)**

The study found that Centre for Language Studies was well positioned to provide the much need technical support to develop languages to a level that they can be used in formal settings. CLS has the capacity to develop orthographies of key local languages. One researcher at CLS reported that “CLS has developed orthography Rules for major Malawian languages like Yao, Chichewa, and Tumbuka”. Another linguist added that “We intend to produce orthography rules for Eleme, Citonga, Cisená and Kiyangonde”. Commenting on the role of CLS in advocating for MTI, one researcher reported that:

Soon after attaining multiparty democracy in 1996, Government put in place a directive that pupils from standards 1 up to 4 be taught in their mother tongue. This was in response to advice given by CLS which played an advisory role to Government on language matters. CLS went on to sensitize people on the new policy through language symposia every year for more than five years.

This shows that there is already a professional institution that can support the adoption of multilingual instruction in Malawi and is well positioned to provide technical support and guide policy direction.

### **4.3.3 Role the Universities in the promotion of MTI**

The study also found out that University of Malawi has a key role to play in the language policy. One language professor posited that “researching and teaching in local languages, training of teachers in local languages and writing of instructional materials in local languages” is the core business of the university. Chancellor College has a department of African languages that could be reconceptualised and capacitated in terms human and material resources.

### **4.4 Constraints that could affect the use of local languages as medium of instruction in Malawi?**

The study has unraveled number of constraints could affect the implementation of local languages as medium of instruction in public schools in Malawi. These include politicization of the language policy, insufficient material resources, limited human resource capacity and misconceptions about the local languages.

#### **4.4.1 Politicization of language policy**

The politicization of the language policy was probably the foremost hindrance to the use of local language as a medium of instruction in schools. One language expert argued that:

The language issue is usually politicized as was the case around 2007-2008. This is the major setback. People do not consider the benefits to the learners who are learning to read and write in a different language from the one they use at home. Furthermore, there is lack of strong leadership that can take on Government and other stakeholders”

Government’s stand on language policy in schools has not been firm. It has been characterised by ambivalence, uncertainty and reversals.

Some experts have attributed government's porous stance to its failure to respect human rights of the Malawian child. One respondent observed that:

Failure to streamline human rights and SDGs in government activities. Language is a human rights issue. The use of foreign languages or non-familiar languages as media of instruction is a violation of learners' rights."

Source C

The argument being that insisting on the use of English as medium of instruction when it well know that children would not access quality instruction is a violation to their right to education.

#### **4.4.2 Developing Instructional Materials in local languages**

The study found that the lack of material resources is a major impediment to the use of local languages as medium of instruction in schools. One respondent pointed out that;

There are resource constraints in ensuring that all textbooks are translated in local languages. However, this is an initial investment and once done, the rewards are better than breeding illiteracy through the use of English which is the likely case in English only policies" Source

A

Although this was cited as key constraint, it was argued that in the long term, dividends that would ensure would outweigh the initial costs of producing instructional materials.

It was also observed that government's own commitment towards the promotion of local languages is not matched by budgetary support. Much of the work in the production of orthographies and other related activities are funded by development partners.

#### **4.5 Human resource capacity**

Human resource capacity was identified as a key constraint that could affect the implementation of MTI. One linguist observed that:

"Lack of permanent language specialists; the language specialists we have, technically, belong to the Department of African Languages and Linguistics

and therefore they seem to have dual allegiance.  
Everybody's baby is nobody's baby." Source C.

The expert went to argue that:

"Lack of capacity at the Centre: We have language specialists, but none of them have significant research experience in the field of language education and language policy, and that "CLS has not been assertive enough as a leader of language issues in the country"  
Source C

One of the University of Malawi language expert posited that:

"Lack of expertise in less spoken languages: These languages see very little investment in their development and thus there are very few people who have deep expertise in them as a result" Source D

The three excerpts above show that there is need to develop resource capacity in local languages for the drive towards multilingual education to commence.

#### 4.6 Misconceptions about local languages

Misconceptions about the relative importance of local languages determine play a crucial role in the use of those local languages as a medium of instruction. One respondent pointed out that;

"There are no funds to carry out sensitization campaigns. Many Malawians wrongly think that the use of local languages will water down the standards of English when the truth of the matter is that local languages are not replacing English in any way. Source C

There are unfounded fears that English as subject would not be "taught" in schools once government adopts local languages as medium of instruction.

It is ironical to observe that while researchers and educationists have provided sufficient evidence of the benefits of MTI, it is the elite that remain sceptical of the relative importance of local languages. These elites send their children to private schools where the medium of

instruction is English. Thus, it not surprising that strides to advocate for the adoption of local languages as medium of instruction are not supported within government bureaucracy and private sector. This view was reported in the following excerpt;

“Attitudes of the elites: Many elites believe that local languages have no value and this stands in the way of progress on the issue. Research findings do not appeal to people’s attitudes” Source D.

## **5.0 Policy Implications**

Outlined below are some key policy directions that assist in preparing Malawi for multilingual education.

- a. There is need language policy discussions at local levels involving local leaders and heritage groupings.
- b. There is need for mass awareness using national and community radios.
- c. Teacher training curriculum should be reviewed to provide teachers conversant in local languages.
- d. There is need for contemporary research on the effectiveness of local languages.
- e. There is need to demonstrate link between language competence and workplace productivity.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

In view of the foregoing, it is evident that there is a general acknowledgement that the use of local languages is medium of instruction in school yields positive outcomes in a child’s education and national development in general. However, much more must be done to facilitate discussions and conversations at grassroots level on the relative importance of the use of local languages in school and communities for personal and sustainable development.

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