

LANGUAGE SKILLS EMPLOYERS WANT

By

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study is part of a broad study titled: *The effect of English-only instruction on skill formation and labour market readiness of young Malawians*. As an interdisciplinary problem which straddles linguistics, education, public policy, labour markets and economics fields involving an interdisciplinary network of academics in Glasgow, Malawi and South Africa, this paper has focused on one question out of many: What language skills do employers want? The overall objective of the study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the language skills employers in Malawi need. This was achieved by a critical analysis of employable skills and languages used at workplaces; an examination of important English language skills at the workplace; cataloguing key English language skills employers look for in employees; gauging how employers evaluate English language skills during recruitment and examining the extent to which employers emphasise English language requirements at all levels of the organisation hierarchy. It also examined English language skill gaps that organisations in Malawi have and potential challenges employers might face or face if they emphasise English language skills only at the workplace.

This is a preliminary cross-sectional qualitative study that targeted a few stakeholders representing three key sectors of the economy- employers in government; private sector companies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The respondents at this preliminary stage of the study covered 22 organisations which include 6 civil service, 7 parastatal, 2 NGOs and 7 private sector organisations (See Annex 1).

Sampling was purposive to ensure employers from targeted sectors are included. Data was collected through open-ended questionnaire and was analysed qualitatively through content analysis that looked at emerging issues in each response according to the focus and objectives of the study.

Overall, the study has revealed that there are more skills employers want beyond language skills which were the focus of this study. There is widespread demand for good English language skills at the workplace in Malawi in line with the language policy reinforced by the New Education Act 2013. It is also evident that as a foreign language which is taught in all schools, most of the lower cadre employees face challenges to communicate effectively because they had not mastered the key English language skills like speaking, writing, listening and reading due to low education attainments. In reality many workplace organisations use local languages to communicate in both work-related and personal issues. Furthermore, there is evidence of English skill gaps in most organisations which are inimical to full participation in decision making to the disadvantage of the organisation. This raises two critical questions: If the language used in the education and training remains fundamentally English, to what extent can potential employees develop sufficient proficiency in employable skills employers want if they do not understand the medium of communication for education and skills training? Would teaching/training and learning in a local language substantially increase the learnability of the employable skills among people in Malawi?

2.0 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

A country with four political regions of South, East, Centre and North each of which has different languages, Malawi has up to twelve languages and numerous dialects though writers are not agreed to the numbers of languages in the country (Kamwendo,2003; Mtenje, 2013; Kishindo, 2001; Kayambazithu, 2003; and Matiki,2003) . For example Chitipa district alone has over 50 dialects. According to Kayambazinthu (2003) Malawi has seven official languages – English, Chichewa, Chitumbuka, Chisena, Chilomwe, Chiyao, Chitonga – and one national language – Chichewa. As part of national building, the first president Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, directed that Chichewa be a national language to be learned in school and spoken by all Malawians. Discussions as to whether Chichewa or English are official languages has been stretched over the past years. The

majority of the commentary on national level language policy in Malawi focuses on the roles of English and Chichewa and does not mention other languages in the country or the roles that they have. Grimes (1996) states that the national language is English. Similarly, Simons and Fennig (2018) also points out that English is the national language, and that Chichewa was the de facto language of national identity. English and Chichewa are reported as both being official languages by Matiki (2001, 2003) and both Kishindo (2001) and Kamwendo (2003) agree that English is the official language and Chichewa is the national language of the country. For Mtenje (2013), English is the main official language and Chichewa is the national language which could be visualised as an official language.

English has become the official language of the public service, industry, commerce and to be taught in schools from primary, secondary to tertiary level. Out of the dominant local languages, only Chichewa is taught as a subject at primary and secondary school level. For one to qualify for the award of a certificate at both the junior and senior secondary school levels, and for one to be selected to the University, a student must pass English. A student who has scored distinctions in 5 subjects and fail English does not qualify for the award of the 'O' level certificate. On the other hand, a student who passes 6 subjects including English qualifies for a certificate even if the candidate has weak passes.

3.0 LANGUAGE AND EMPLOYEMENT SKILLS: AN OVERVIEW

According to Gray (ud), language may be regarded as, “any means of expressing emotional and mental concepts by any living being or beings whatsoever and communicating them to or receiving them from other living beings’. It has a very important social purpose because it is mainly used for linguistic communication. One cannot imagine a world without language. In formal settings like public and private, civil society organisations, industry, hotels, education institutions and informal settings such as families, villages, communities, among others, language is vital for communicating information, ideas, views or feelings.

Among the labour power that employers pay for at the workplace, language skills are part of the package of the labour power. Before discussing the general language issues, a comment on

employable skills need to be made. Employability skills have often been cited by employers as the skills most critical to workplace success in the 21st-century economy. A University of Malawi (2018) Tracer Study reported that both employers and graduates recommended that the university should enhance language, communication and soft skills of its graduates, increase practical elements and job market exposure, boost professional ethics and develop effective and efficient conflict resolution systems among them to enhance relevance of the graduates to the world of work.

According to the Association for Career and Technical Education ACTE,(ud.), employability skills include critical thinking, adaptability, problem solving, oral and written communications, collaboration and teamwork, creativity, responsibility, professionalism, ethics, and technology use. For Dench (et.al,1998) communication, information technology, improving own learning and performance, application of number, problem solving and working with others, are some of the employability skills. The ability to communicate effectively with superiors, colleagues, staff and customers is essential to all employees irrespective of industry. Workers in the digital age must know how to effectively convey and receive messages in person as well as via phone, email, and social media.

For Pandey and Pandey (2014), enhanced communication skills in English can result to not only an improved social life, but also better job opportunities. From job interviews to the actual professional world, communication skills are very crucial, and being proficient in English means being able to communicate clearly and effectively (ibid). Most business contracts are written in English and that handling of international business deals require effective skills in English. However, using incorrect tenses, prepositions, or generally grammar and the like will make one's statement less accurate (ibid). Thus, for one to be competent in the professional world, one should have good grasp of the English language skills. In addition, in today's globalized world, people are increasingly mobile and often need to communicate across different languages (Grenier, 2015). For Grenier (2015) fluency in a dominant language is important to economic success and increases economic efficiency of a particular country. However, this presupposes that English is the only language used internationally. Yet, there are other countries in the world that do not use English as a dominant language. Thus, there are more languages in use in different setting than just English.

According to Mansour and Dean (2016), the world of employment has changed dramatically and that technology is impacting practices and experiences to the extent that societies are becoming more global and multicultural. The two argue that with the rise of globalization, employability is becoming one of the main goals for education systems since employers require employees to have soft or non-technical skills in addition to technical skills. Almost every job requires workers to use verbal and non-verbal communication skills. That's why verbal skills are highly ranked on the candidate evaluation checklist used by many job interviewers (Mansour and Dean, 2016). The four most common types of communication used by managers include interpersonal communication, nonverbal communication, written communication, and oral communication. Verbal communication encompasses both how you deliver messages and how you receive them (Mansour and Dean, 2016).

Workers who can convey information clearly and effectively are highly valued by employers. Employees who can interpret messages and act appropriately on the information that they receive have a better chance of excelling on the job. Verbal communication in a work setting takes place between many different individuals and groups such as co-workers, bosses and subordinates, employees, customers, teachers and students, speakers and their audiences. Verbal communication occurs in many different contexts including training sessions, presentations, group meetings, performance appraisals, one-on-one discussions, interviews, disciplinary sessions and consulting engagements. In organizations, communication lines are top-down and down-up, horizontal and diagonal. It also takes place between the organisational members and the outside world of customers, banks, government institutions and other stakeholders who are interested with the organisation in one way or the other (Dzimhiri, 2015).

For Pandey and Pandey (2014), English is the language of international business, science and research. Over 80% of academic journals are written entirely in English and an estimated 85% of international organisations use English as one of their working languages (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2016). At the international commercial sphere, English has become lingua-franca of the business world irrespective of geographical, social, political or religious differences.

It is being recognized as one of the six official languages of the United Nations (Pandey and Pandey, 2014).

The Malawi Education Act 2013 stipulates that the language-in-education policy aims at ensuring that education in Malawi will produce students who have ‘knowledge and skills relevant for social and economic development of the nation’ by providing quality education which is inclusive and accessible (Law Commission 2013, pi). Education should provide a means to ‘promote national unity, patriotism and loyalty to the nation’ as well as ‘an appreciation of one’s culture’ (Law Commission 2013, pp8-9). At the same time, it should produce graduates who are able to ‘compete successfully in the modern and ever-changing world’ (*Ibid*). Against this background, the Education Act 2013 provides English as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges (Law Commission, 2013: 42)

However, there is a feeling among academics that adopting English-only policy has its own shortcomings. For example, the language requirement for becoming a member of parliament (MP) in Malawi is the ability ‘to speak and read the English language well enough to take part in the active proceedings of Parliament’ (Government of Malawi 1998, p16). According to Matiki (2001; 2003), by placing English as the sole language requirement this immediately restricts the ability of a majority of Malawians to participate in the political domain. He further argues that within Parliament, English-only policy negatively effects the participation of politicians as MPs are mocked for using incorrect English (Matiki 2001). There are a good number of MPs do not have an adequate level of English to effectively participate in debates and parliamentary proceedings (Matiki 2003). Additionally, all parliamentary proceedings are published in English, meaning that a substantial portion of the Malawian public are unable to accurately know what is occurring in the political world of their country (Matiki 2001). As English is the only official language requirement for medical staff to work in Malawian hospitals, foreign staff are unable to effectively interact with patients and therefore use unofficial interpreters to assist in their work (Kamwendo, 2004a). One of the major concerns of those who criticise the English only policy is that the constitutional right to participate in the cultural life of one’s choice’ (Government of Malawi 1998, p8) is limited by legislative dominance of English in key domains such as politics, health, education and restriction on the use of Malawian languages. There is tension in the language policy

and linguistic reality of the country (Moyo 2001, Kamwendo 2015) as exemplified by a conflict between the official language policies which are in place and the actual linguistic reality of Malawi.

4.0 PRELIMINARY ISSUES EMERGING FROM THE STUDY

4.1 Key employable skills

One of the key areas the study was interested in was to catalogue general skills that employers would want to see in a candidate they want to employ. According to a key respondent representing the voice of the private sector, public and NGOs in Malawi, employable skills include soft and hard skills. Ability to communicate, logical thinking, diversity skills, interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence were given as examples of soft skills. Someone with excellent communication skills and particularly a good command of English. A person who is proficient in English or any language is able to communicate clearly and effectively. It is argued that ‘no matter how qualified or skilled one is in a specific area, inability to communicate renders those skills redundant. In job interviews, interviewers quickly make judgments and give high rating a candidate who is proficient in the language of the interview.

Again, people who are critical, provide an in-depth analysis of situations and demonstrate out-of-the box thinking, are preferred by employers. Also, employers want people who are able to adapt to the rapid changes in the environment. In a similar manner, logical thinking and reasoning helps one to have coherent and clear flow of ideas and this makes it easier for one to achieve set objectives and employers are attracted by this skill. General awareness of oneself and others, known as emotional intelligence, is another critical skill especially in contemporary times when supervisors are expected to motivate subordinates rather than instilling fears in them.

On the other hand, hard skills, otherwise known as quantitative skills, which include numeracy, multiskilling and ICT are important skills employers want. Numeracy is viewed as an important

skill because even in non-mathematical jobs like human resources management one cannot achieve set targets without being numerate. Multi-tasking skills, which enable one to do several tasks and activities at the same time, is also important. In order to enhance efficiency and effectiveness, some NGOs employ fewer support staff who can perform different activities like running errands, making tea, filing and managing office routines. Furthermore ICT skills are another set of employable skills. All professionals use information and communication technology to perform different activities in their organisations. The ability to work and socialise with workmates from different backgrounds and being able accept other people's views is a critical employable skill sought by employers. However, the weight given to each skill would vary from one job to another and this is stated in the job description.

4.2 Languages used in the workplace in Malawi

A general consensus was emerging that English was the most commonly used language in the business world as handling international business deals require effective skills in English. This is true in view of the fact modern society is a global village. In the majority of cases, this agreement was justified on account that company documents, conditions of service, policies, rules, regulations, procedures and strategic plans were in English. To stress the importance of the English language skills, one respondent in the private sector noted, *'my organization is donor funded and we have employees from different countries/nationalities and so English language skills make communication with internal and external stakeholders easy. Having a common language that is easily understood and accepted by everyone increases harmony and minimizes conflicts in the work place'*.

Nature of industry and the level at which an employee was operating in the organisational hierarchy determined the extent to which English was used. For instance, in the academia, the ability to communicate in English is key because communication within the university between students and lecturers in Malawi was in English. For lower jobs, menial in nature, communication is largely in Chichewa or local language spoken in the area. The geographical location of the organisation, determined also the language used in the lower levels of the organisation. Chichewa, Chitumbuka, Chisena, Chiyao and other languages are used for communication at various levels in different organisations.

A welfare Officer in a parastatal organisation said, ‘before joining Southern Region Water Board, I was with First Capital Bank where English was the primary language. The organisation took further steps to ensure that it is the only language used on internal emails, meetings and anywhere within the vicinity of the organisation. ..but the case is different with where I am now as Chichewa is spoken most of the time even with senior level managers. After all, the majority of customers we serve are in remote rural areas making English too alien to the current organisation’.

A common language is viewed as a unifying factor at workplaces. It tends to form a common base for all employees, employers/managers and lessens the possibility of creating silos among individuals and groups who might be divided by different languages spoken at the workplace.

4.3 Importance of language skills in the workplaces

The study aimed at eliciting the views of the respondents regarding the importance of language skills at the workplace. It was generally observed that language skills help one to communicate intended messages across workers and to clear potential misunderstanding with respect to goals, objectives, targets and to report progress on the same. Achievement of *‘our mandates is a product of team work as each person is assigned to contribute according to their areas of expertise’*. Effective teamwork requires effective communication which in turn depends on language skills. Employees with good language skills express themselves better when putting across official matters. On the other hand, a subordinate that speaks and writes concisely impresses their employers and are therefore viewed as an asset. Good Language skills contribute to one’s ability to influence others. According to one respondent, *‘language skills are important at the workplace because effective communication enables any organisation to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate the impact of their activities or projects to society’*. Thus there is a relationship between language skills and productivity at the workplace. One respondent noted:

‘When employees at the work are able to listen to instruction, speak, read or write in a particular language properly, communication becomes easy. They are able to interact with various stakeholders whom they deal with properly. In so doing, the organization is able to achieve its goals. For example, we have an office in Mzuzu where the Tumbuka language is spoken and understood by the majority of the people. We once sent employees who were not conversant with the language to work there. We discovered that production was going down because of language

barriers. We replaced these employees with colleagues who were fluent in Tumbuka. As of now, productivity has improved tremendously'

4.4 Key language skills employers look for in employees

It has been evident from the foregoing that language skills are crucial at the workplace. There are several skills involved in each language. It was therefore necessary for the researcher to elicit the various skills employer's want in each language. There are several skills that are common in all languages. Speaking or oral communication skills are important. As one employer noted, *the ability to speak is regarded very highly in every language. One is expected to be fluent and concise ensuring careful selection of words that fit the situation with the audience/listener in mind.* Employees must be capable of speaking their language fluently, writing official correspondence in a manner that is clear, and also making presentations either using power point, or other means. 'It is only when one speaks that people realise the intellectual capital, analytical skill capacity and wisdom in that individual.

Written language skills like writing and reading are also viewed as crucial. Usually letters, circulars, reports, policies, speeches and conditions of service, minutes are written every now and then. The art of writing is so important that many employers cannot employ an individual whose written language skills are substandard.

Ability to listen is another important language skill employers look for. One is expected to listen carefully to a narrative or grievance before making any meaningful response. If a person has not understood what is being communicated to them, it is difficult to take appropriate action with regard to what has been communicated. As with other language skills, the study revealed that employer will be keener to take a candidate for managerial position one who can listen with patience and listen well. Employees need to listen to instructions, advice and be able to follow a conversation fully. It is only when one listen carefully that one can identify key issues in a grievance and be able to handle issues properly.

4.5 Evaluation of language skills during recruitment

During the recruitment process employers have to gauge these skills before they employ an individual to work for them. It was therefore necessary that the study determines ways in which employers evaluate language skills among employees during the recruitment process. Three methods were dominant- aptitude test, interviews and demonstration/facilitation.

The first method for determining language skills is by administering an aptitude test where candidates are asked to explain or summarise some work procedures. This helps to test their writing as well as comprehension skills. Sometimes aptitude tests are conducted prior to the oral interviews. But most of these skills are noticed during the oral presentations. For example, for more senior positions, employees are asked to prepare presentations to assess not only their knowledge but their written and oral language skills as well. An example of a question that has the potential to uncover proficiency in the language as well as other employable skills is: what is your vision of the position you are being considered for?

The second method for testing of language competences is through the interview process which by its nature creates an opportunity for expression. Those who demonstrate strong command and comprehension of a language are heavily advantaged. As one respondent noted *'The way the candidate articulates issues as he/she responds to interview questions reveals his proficiency in language skills. The panel looks at logical presentation of issues, fluent command of the language, good grammar, and good pronunciation of words, and ability to summarise and grasp issues raised in the question quickly.'* Employers normally look for candidates who have an excellent command of the language, articulate the issues clearly and logically, are confident and respond promptly when asked questions. Candidates also need to demonstrate creativity, in-depth understanding of their technical areas of competence as they respond to questions.

It was widely agreed that open ended questions are deliberately used during interviews to allow the employer to gauge the candidate's mastery of the language the employer wants. A good example, of a question is: 'what challenges do you anticipate in this job and how would you deal with each of them?' This question allows the candidate to display their best communication skills to convince the interview panel that they are suitable for the job. The oral interview also assesses the candidate's listening skills as they evaluate the candidates' ability to answer questions

according to the interviewer's expectation without having to ask for more repetition of the question.

Again, it was evident that through the interview, language skills are assessed by observation – following how a candidate is able to express oneself when answering questions. With oral communication, facial expression, body language and the posture the candidate uses can all demonstrate not only the language skills per se but also emotional stability and confidence in a language as well as in the job. In a written interview, observations can be made using the quality of handwriting of the candidate and the confidence displayed by not erasing one's writing in different pages of the answer sheet. Similarly, when candidates submit documents in an application pack, one is able to see the written language on both the application letter and the curriculum vitae to detect proficiency in the language. This is also instrumental in the process of shortlisting candidates to be invited for interviews. One respondent summarised skills employers detect through observation during the recruitment process as below:

- a) When the candidate introduces themselves in terms of who they are*
- b) When a problem is posed and the candidate is explaining how solve it*
- c) In the overall assessment of performance during the interview*
- d) In analysing the overall impression*
- e) Fluency- how fluent the candidate is in that particular language*
- f) Word articulation- how the candidate is pronouncing the words*

For candidates whose jobs involve dealing with community members or teaching, they are given time to prepare and present a lecture or perform a role play abstracting a real situation. In the process of these demonstration/presentation, employers can detect several skills that are required in a language as well as other employable skills discussed above.

According to Powers (2010) although listening, reading, writing and speaking are related language skills, they are 'distinct, and each contributes uniquely to an individual's overall communicative ability'. He further argues that the use of several sources of information yields better decisions about the competence of an individual in each of the language skills.

4.6 Emphasis on English language only

In view of the fact that the official language in Malawi is English, the study sought to determine the extent to which employing organisations insist on the use of the English language in all aspects of communication and at all levels of the organisational hierarchy- ie from CEO to Cleaner/grounds labour. According to one respondent, *‘English is indeed very important because even a foreigner will at least understand the language...it gives a good picture when employees present in English language because it shows professionalism, modernity and that English words make presentation shorter than Chichewa’*.

Responses did not vary widely among respondents in the various sectors of the economy. It was evident that position in the organisational hierarchy dictated the extent to which the English language was usually adhered to. For middle level to senior level staff, English, was the key language while for support staff, communication was rarely in English. As one respondent observed, *‘English language is stressed with different degrees at different levels, with a lot more emphasis as one moves up the hierarchy. In general jobs that involve a lot of interaction with people who are not local and those jobs that involve report writing require perfect knowledge of the English language’*.

The study found that the pattern is not very different in Government as one public servant observed: *‘in my Ministry English Language is emphasised at management level and during meetings and in circulars’*. He further observed that when *‘we go to inquire something at someone’s office we usually use vernacular language like Chichewa and those in the Northern region of Malawi use Tumbuka’*. In the private sector, the pattern is not different. As one respondent noted, *‘from CEO to Receptionist, English is critical but below that, (e.g. Cleaner/Grounds Labourers), we may use the local language notably Chichewa, since most employees at that level are not able to speak English fluently’*. And another one reiterated that *‘the emphasis on English language is mainly in the technical, professional and executive management levels. Below these levels communication is largely in the local languages like Chewa, Tumbuka, Yao, Lomwe and so on.*

The nature of one’s job was another deciding factor. Lecturers in universities and teachers in secondary schools will teach in English all the subjects such as mathematics, economics, sociology, history, biology, public administration, law among others because the syllabus and books used are written in English.

Another respondent agreed with others when he said: *English is our official language. We interact with most of our clients in English. However, we sometimes deal with clients who are not fluent in English. In that case, we are not prohibited to communicate in our mother language.*

Similarly, there was not much different in responses from persons from the Non-Governmental Organisations. *‘English is pretty much the most basic skill employers want however the vernacular languages are also important in order to ensure that those rank and files are able to understand and voice their concerns or report back progress of their performance to their supervisors’.*

The nature of the organisation (in terms of whether it is trans-national/multinational or international as opposed to national or local) determines the extent to which English was the major language of communication. In highly expatriate-dominated organisations, employees are expected to speak basic English that can be understood by expatriate staff. Worth noting is that in some cases, expatriates were encouraged to know a bit of the local language spoken in the district of assignment to ensure that they communicate with local people easily.

4.7 English language skill gaps

The study sought to determine English language skill gaps that employer experience in their employees. Overall the study revealed that there were several gaps regarding language proficiency among employees in many work organisations in public, private and non-governmental organisations. According to respondents in the public service, ‘most recent graduates do not possess proper language skills for business communication like how to write and present memorandum, official letters, circulars, reports, minutes on both file or during meetings’. And another corroborated that ‘there are circumstances whereby an employee with a very good degree, say with the grade of a distinction, fails to write a report...so writing is a major gap in the English language skills among employees’.

Others also feel that most employees lack the skills to use respectful language when responding to letters. This was also evident in spoken language where employees fail to handle discussion with internal and external stakeholders in a diplomatic manner. There were also ‘noticeable gaps in spoken English where fluency of the employees is compromised as at times they combine both Chichewa and English during formal discussions’. This is explained in terms of the low background of employees’ education. Quality of schools employees attended also contributes to

the level of language fluency. Those who went to good private and public schools speak better English than those who went to poorly resourced rural schools. Junior members of staff were limited especially those who did not go beyond secondary school education. Consequently, skill gaps were identified largely in the quality of reports and memoranda these employees prepare and submit to their supervisors. Usually these include grammatical errors and lack of clarity in explaining certain issues.

Linking level of education and English language skill gaps, one respondent noted: *Less than 10% of our employees are graduates. ..most of them hold MSCE – ‘O’ level certificate and very few diploma holders. As such, English language proficiency is a challenge.* There is inability to write in acceptable basic English that could easily be understood. Poor sentence construction are said to be common in other workplaces.

While in other organisations employees understand English, the ability to write and speak the language remains a challenge. It is believe that a good number of employees are not able to express themselves properly when they speak or write English.

Generation factors are also said to account for differences in the fluency with which people speak the English language. There are others who believes that ‘the young generation struggle in communicating well in English compared to old timers....grammar is problematic.’ On the other hand, others are of the view that the current generation speaks fluent English than the old timers. This needs to be substantiated by a further study.

Other gaps in skills include:

- a) Weak articulation in oral communication
- b) Weak writing skills
- c) Poor listening skills, most people do not listen to hear the other’s side of the story
- d) Operating at emotional levels instead of being rational
- e) Being careless with language use
- f) Inability to read properly
- g) Poor grammar and sentence construction
- h) Knowledge gap due to low education levels

4.8 Challenges in emphasising *only* English language skills

The study attempted to determine the challenges that could be had in emphasising English as a medium of communication at the work place. Although a few were of the view that English be made the key language of communication at the workplace, the majority expressed disagreement for different reasons.

One respondent who supported the need to insist on English language only pointed that there was need to emphasise English language at work place to avoid getting embarrassed when the organisation receives visitors who do not speak the local language. Sometimes they may feel that they have not been received well because of the language barrier. This usually happens to black foreigners whereby an assumption was made that they were Malawian and they could speak the national language.

In learning institutions like primary and secondary schools as well as universities, respondents were of the view that insisting on English only as a medium of communication constrain the learning process as students will not be forthcoming to ask questions in areas they are not clear. This is so because most students fail to communicate to lecturers in English despite knowing that they are in an institution of higher learning. Even when they have gone to the workplace on attachment, insisting on speaking English has made students reluctant to ask or seek guidance from experienced managers or scientists at work. Similarly, even at the workplace, graduates who have not mastered adequately the spoken language and are introverts do not contribute in high-level meetings much as they might have good ideas. This deprives the organisation good ideas or innovative approaches to managing or implementing organisational initiatives.

Writing reports is also a challenge to employees whose command of the written language is below average. As a result, *it takes time for reports and minutes to be compiled and this affect effectiveness and productivity. In some cases, filling complex forms in English was a problem. As a result, most of the spaces are not filled.*

It is also argued that listening is a major challenge if instructions are given in English. Employees with low proficiency in the English language do things which are contrary to what ought to be done because they did not comprehend the language of instruction. In fact lowly-educated employees have inferiority complex and feel they were not important in the organisation.

Again employers miss out employees who are very skilled workers because they are not good at both spoken and written English. As one respondent noted, *the challenge is that an employee may be good in mathematics, science and innovation skills but be unable to communicate clearly in English.* On the other hand, employees might be brilliant in both written and spoken English when in practice they do not have skills, knowledge and attitudes to do the work well.

Insisting on English only is perceived as a barrier to good service delivery to members and clients who do not understand English. In other words, performance may be affected as a result of miscommunication and this leads to failure to achieve the intended goals and objectives. As one respondent noted, *‘even the clients keep away from sharing ideas or relevant feedback to the organisation because they cannot express themselves in English.* This is counter-productive because these clients might have great ideas that could bring a turnaround strategy to the organisation.

Diversity is another key issue at the workplace in modern Malawi. There was an increase in the number of volunteers and other professional/ technical officers coming in from countries that are not traditionally English speaking, like the Chinese. As one respondent noted *‘these days, people prefer to use the language they are more comfortable with than just maintaining the status quo for its own sake and that it is the nationality, level and status of the person one is communicating with which determines the language choices you make.’* Thus, focusing on English when there are people who are fluent in other languages like Chinese, Japanese and others at the workplaces is not a good policy as communication is a vital human activity at the workplace. It was also becoming increasingly realised that for one to be employed in international organisations, other languages like Arabic, Latin or French are important. That is why other capable individuals have failed to secure employment in international organizations because they knew English only.

Again, most jobs like health assistants, agriculture extension staff and community development assistants involve communicating and interacting with local communities. These require the use of local languages to ensure that officers gain rapport and trust within the local communities. For a local officer to use an interpreter in such situations, communities will look at such a person as being very proud and therefore not one of them. Consequently, the uptake of technologies or health messages will be low. Furthermore, within the work place, some issues, particularly disputes are easily resolved with the lower level staff when the discussion is conducted in the local languages.

Others believe that when an officer insist on English language as the only language for communication at the workplace, *'people do not come to your office for fear that you will speak to them in English'*. Others *'regard you as a difficult person who is treating your juniors as if they are still in school.'* Furthermore, junior staff do not favour coming to an individual who speak English all the time *'because they say you pretend to be white man when you are African who was born and grew up in Malawi...they laugh at you and even backbite you for being strict with English'*. Other observed that, *'when they see you in the corridors they (employees) run away to avoid meeting you'*.

Insisting that everyone speak English only at the work place was undemocratic because it barred employees from expressing their views freely and making effective contribution in meetings aimed at discussing key issues affecting the organisation.

5.0 Conclusion

Language skills are very crucial in workplace organization such that employees need language skills to ensure they participate in their work lives fully for the benefit of the organisation. Undoubtedly, language is one of the employable skills. Others include technical skills, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence skills, numerical and computer skills just to name some. These are classified as hard (quantitative) and soft (qualitative) skills. There is evidence from the study that the centrality of language skills is to enhance communication between managers and employers, employees and customers and among the employees themselves both as individuals and as groups. Performance of activities in an organisation is dependent on exchange of information between persons and for such information of be understood, one expects clarity and understanding. As regards Malawi, what is emerging from the study is that although English is the official language of business to be used in the workplace, it is not used by everyone at each level of the organisational hierarchy; that the lower people go, the more they use local languages spoken in the area where the organisation is.

It was also evident that lower levels employees with little education attainments did not participate fully in meetings where English is the dominant language. Workers also fail to express their grievances because they cannot speak English. This is also true with Malawian Parliamentarians. As English is the official language for deliberations in the National Assembly, those whose educational attainments are low were unable to express their opinions and proposals for fear that they would be ridiculed. This in a way is denying the august house the wisdom of these elderly, mature and experienced citizens which would go a long way in improving the functioning of the machinery of government and service delivery by the executive arm of government.

Again, it was increasingly becoming clear that there were other organisations that could not do without English because most of the employees were foreigners and therefore the only way out to communicate with them was in English. This was also contrasted with the view that much as there are foreigners in most organisations due to the global nature of 'our village' there was also evidence that not all the foreigners like Chinese and Japanese speak English. In others words, it was not just the lowly educated citizens of Malawi who experience challenges at communication at the workplace through using English, there were other nationalities as well.

Thus, any language policy has to look into these issues. There is need for assessment of language needs and gaps in employment per sector in order to fully comprehend the extent of the language challenge in the labour market. There were also sentiments that there are language gaps in the English language in both the public, private, parastatal and non-governmental organisation in Malawi. These include poor sentence construction, insufficient volumes of the vocabulary to help people to speak freely or understand the spoken language properly. Poor writing skills were also mentioned especially to do with report and letter writing, writing of minutes and speeches. These gaps were attributed to low levels of education which denied individuals the opportunity to master written and spoken English language. This raises a critical question for another study: If learning in a foreign language leads to several gaps in the language skills used at the workplace, to what extent does this affect the development of other employable skills at the workplace? For example apart from the language skills, one has to learn technical skills, soft skills, quantitative skills and others for them to be competent and proficient at work. If the language used in education and training institutions remained fundamentally English, how could trainees develop sufficient proficiency in the various other skills if they did not understand the medium of communication for

skills training? Would teaching/training and learning in a local language substantially increase the learnability of the employable skills among trainees in Malawi? These are some of the future research questions aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of the challenges raised in this study.

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Annex 1. LIST OF RESPONDENTS

NAME	ORGANISATION	TYPE
Ambumulire Itimu	Nalikule- Principal	Civil Service - LL
Chancellor Kaferapanjira	MCCCI –CEO	Private-- BT
Crispin Chikwama	FDH Director HR IPMM	Private-BT
Dickson Chunga	OPC Chief Director	Civil Service-LL
Dr Florida Banda	Domasi College- Principal	Civil Service- ZA
George Dzimbiri	Polytechnic- Lecturer	Parastatal- BT
Jessie Ching’oma	MCTU- Education and Training Officer	Umbrella Trade Unions- NGO - LL
Annette Kaonga	Immigration HR	Civil Service- BT
Joyce Pelusi	FDH HR Officer	Private-BT
Lewis Dzimbiri	SRWB Welfare Officer	Parastatal-ZA
Michael Ndaferankhande	MRA IPMM President	Parastatal-BT
Spencer Maiden	Old Mutual HR Department	Private-BT
Orphan Chirwa	Britam – HR Director	Private-BT

Joseph Phaso	HR LUANAR	Parastatal-LL
Phoebe Nyasulu	Administrator Baylor College	Private-LL
Rose Kalizang'oma	MOEST Chief Education Officer Higher Education	Civil Service-LL
Benard Tembo	Director HR DHRMD	Civil Service-LL
Vera Kamtukule	SMP Executive Director	Private-LL
Yazi Chavula	CARD Administration	NGO-BT
Martha Sambani	MUST	Parastatal-THY
Dancan Chambamba	SRWB Director of Admin and HR	Parastatal-ZA
Prof. Edrine Kayambazithu	UNIMA Professor of African Language and Linguistics	Parastatal- ZA