

Literacy development through a local language in a multilingual setting in Malawi

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Introduction

A lot of reforms have been made in the education sector since Malawi became independent in 1964. Some of these reforms have been made in the area of school language. For instance, in 1968 (see Mchazime: 1996) government elevated Chichewa from 16 other local languages to be the national language and a school subject which has to be studied from grade 1 onwards in all schools in the country. In the same year, English was chosen as the official language of the state and a school subject from grade 1 onwards. Although the review of the school language policy that was made in 1996 ushered in the use of mother tongue or vernacular as a medium of instruction from Standard 1 through to 4 (see Ministry of Education: 1996), Chichewa and English still remained as the national and official languages respectively and also as school subjects.

The status of Chichewa as a language of education was strengthened in 1989 when government approved that all books for grades 1 to 4 except those of English should be written in Chichewa. What this meant, was that pupils' books for grades 1 through to 4 for subjects such as Mathematics and Social Studies (see MIE Maths pupils' book 2: 1993 and Social Studies pupils' book 2:1993) had to be written in Chichewa. By writing these pupils' books in Chichewa meant that Chichewa was to be used not only as the medium of instruction in these grades but also as vehicle through which children were to acquire their permanent literacy skills.

Since February 1999, Improving Educational Quality Project (IEQ) with financial support from USAID has been conducting a longitudinal study on the quality of education which children receive at classroom level in Malawi. One area that was being investigated in this study was the level of literacy skill acquisition by children in grades 2, 3 and 4 in Mangochi

and Balaka districts, both of which are multilingual societies that have Chiyao as their mother tongue majority language. However, in this report our focus will be on grade 2 pupils.

This paper, therefore, discusses some of the findings on how pupils are developing their literacy skills through Chichewa in this multilingual setting in Malawi. In particular, this paper will discuss how pupils in a multilingual setting Malawi are developing their literacy skills through Chichewa from grade 2 onwards.

Research on literacy acquisition levels

Background

In a bid to improve pupil access to school, government introduced free primary education (FPE) in Malawi in 1994. This, as was intended, saw an additional 1.3 million children enrolling for school throughout the country. However, this sudden increase in pupil enrolment created some imbalances between resource supply and demand. As a consequence teacher/pupil, textbook/pupil and classroom/pupil ratios rose to high proportions.

In order to correct the imbalance between qualified teachers and pupils available, government recruited large numbers of untrained teachers. These were given a 2 to 3 week orientation course in teaching before they were assigned a class (Chilora: 2001: p2). However, by flooding the primary school sector with a huge number of untrained teachers, the problem of quality of education which pupils receive at classroom level might have been created. It was against this background that the government of Malawi, in collaboration with other donor agencies such as USAID decided to focus its attention on improving the quality of education in this country.

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ)/Malawi project is a partnership between the Malawi Institute of Education and Save the Children Federation (USA). It receives financial support from USAID. In February 1999 IEQ/Malawi project set out on a longitudinal study to investigate the quality of education which children receive in schools at classroom level. One area which IEQ researchers were investigating was the level of literacy skill development through Chichewa by children in grade 2 whose home language is Chiyao and those speak Chichewa at home.

Sample and methodology

The sample in this study included standards 2, 3 and 4 children in 60 schools in Mangochi and 5 schools in Balaka .districts both of which are in the southern part of Malawi These schools were selected using random sampling method after stratifying on school and class size. In each class, an equal number of boys and girls was selected for inclusion. These pupils were selected as follows: 16 pupils from standard 2, eight pupils from standard 3 and also eight pupils from standard 4. Their teachers, headteachers and community leaders also participated in this study.

In February 1999, shortly after the beginning of the school year, the 65 schools were visited and data were collected from 1855 pupils, 188 teachers, 65 headteachers and at least one group of community leaders per school which comprised an equal number of men and women. Near the end of the school year in October 1999 researchers visited the 65 schools and reassessed 1508 (i.e. 75.4%) of the original pupils. Data were also collected from headteachers, teachers and community teachers. In October 2000, IEQ researchers returned to the 65 schools and reassessed 1210 (i.e. 65.23%) of the original pupils that were assessed in February 1999. Data were once again collected from teachers, headteachers and members of the community for each school.

In order to conduct this study, data collection instruments were developed on crucial issues that were seen as indicators of quality education. For example, pupils' achievement instruments, that were curriculum based, were used to assess performance in Chichewa. These instruments included reading texts that were taken from textbooks for grade 2. Interview instruments were also developed for teachers, headteachers, pupils and community members. In addition, lesson planning and observation instruments were developed in order to collect data on actual classroom practices for teaching Chichewa. These data collection instruments were pilot tested at two schools in Mangochi district in February and October 1999 and also in October 2000, and were revised for clarity of questions, level of difficulty and number and range of questions.

Prior to data collection, research assistants were recruited and trained. These included practicing primary school teachers, primary education advisers, teacher trainers, education

trainers from Save the Children Federation and curriculum developers from the Malawi Institute of Education.

Data on levels of literacy skill acquisition were collected over three-week periods in February and October 1999 and also in October 2000. This data were collected by a team of 3 pupil assessors who spent 3 days at each school in order to complete collecting this data. During each of these data collection periods, cohort 2 children (i.e. grade 2 pupils at baseline) were first, asked to read some Chichewa words that are commonly used in their textbook. Then, they were asked to read a text that was taken from Chichewa textbooks for standard 2. In addition, they were also asked some comprehension questions on the text that they had read. Besides these reading exercises, all the pupils were asked to write down their names and to write down any ten words that they knew in Chichewa. At the end of each data collection period, the data was entered into the computer, cleaned and then analyzed. What follows is, therefore, a summary of findings on teacher and pupil characteristics and on levels of literacy skill development by gender and home language over a period of two years.

Summary of findings

Teacher characteristics

Teachers play a significant role in the process of equipping learners with literacy skills (Wright: 1987). They are the ones who are responsible for guiding pupils' learning including their literacy skill development. Therefore, in this study, a lot of data were collected on teachers' academic and professional training, their home language and their competence in Chichewa which is currently the language of instructional materials for pupils in grades 1 through 4 in all schools.

In Malawi, for one to be selected as primary school teacher trainee, he or she must have completed either two or four years of secondary school education. To be certified as a teacher, one has to undergo a formal course of training in teaching at one of the primary teacher training colleges. Therefore one area that was being investigated in this study were the various characteristics of primary schools teachers who are charged with the responsibility of equipping the learners with literacy skills.

On academic qualifications, the investigations revealed that the majority of teachers (75.6 percent) were Junior Certificate of Education (JCE) holders (i.e. two years of secondary school education) whereas only 24.6 percent were holders of the Malawi school certificate of education (ie four years of secondary school education). Also, the investigations showed that the majority of these teachers (61 percent) were not trained as teachers. On the language that they speak at home, these investigations revealed that the majority of teachers (67 percent) did not speak Chiyao (the predominant language of the area) at home. However, over 90 percent of the teachers indicated that they could speak Chichewa, which is the language that is presently used for equipping learners with basic literacy skills.

These results show that, in spite of lacking professional training in teaching, the majority of teachers have wide enough knowledge of Chichewa which they can use to assist all their learners to acquire literacy skills through it.

Pupil characteristics

Besides collecting data on literacy skill development, a lot of other data were also collected on pupils' background information. This included data on their home language, and age ranges. On the language that pupils speak at home, the investigation revealed that the majority of pupils (64 percent) in the sample spoke Chiyao, whereas 35 percent reported that they spoke Chichewa and only 1 percent said that they spoke other languages (Chilomwe, Chisena, Chitumbuka, etc). On the age ranges, the investigations showed that Chiyao speaking children were, generally a year older than speakers of other languages in all the classes. However there were no further investigations that were made to find out why Chiyao children were a year older than the speakers of other languages.

Levels of Chichewa reading mastery

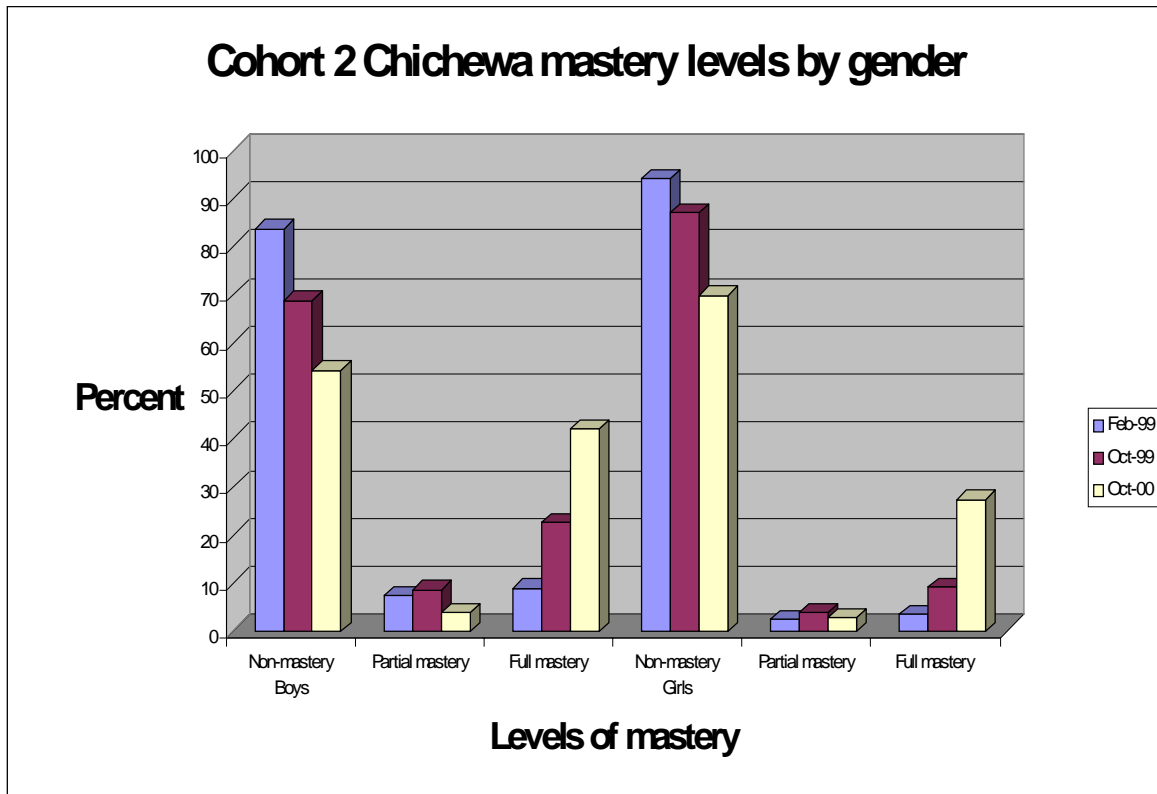
The findings on the levels of reading skill development are based on the texts from Chichewa pupils' book for standard 2 that all pupils were asked to read during the February 1999 baseline survey, October 1999 follow-up survey and October 2000 follow-up survey. Findings from the baseline survey, established baseline level of literacy skill acquisition for all the pupils. This then, acted as benchmark for monitoring further progress in the development of permanent literacy skills through Chichewa.

Descriptive analysis of the baseline data and of the follow-up data in October 1999 and also in October 2000 compares gender and home language differences in reading skill acquisition through Chichewa in the three cohorts.

Levels of literacy skill development through Chichewa by gender

The baseline findings on grade 2 pupils, show that generally many pupils, (that is, 83.7% of the boys and 94.1% of the girls) entered grade 2 before they had acquired enough literacy skills. A lot of these pupils (68.8% of the boys and 87.1% of the girls) also completed grade 2 before they had acquired adequate literacy skills that might enable them to cope with reading work in the subsequent class. The consequence of this was that there were still many pupils (54.2% of the boys and 69.8% of the girls) in this cohort who still could not read a Chichewa text that was taken from a lower grade level textbook during the October 2000 survey. This was the time that pupils in this cohort were completing their grade 3 course of instruction in literacy skills. As illustrated in the graph below, there were more girls in this cohort who did not acquire adequate literacy skills at each of the data collection period. What this means is that a lot of the pupils were promoted from grade 2 to grade 3 before they had not acquired adequate literacy skills that would help them cope with a heavier reading load in the subsequent class. This kind of promotion was likely to frustrate some of the learners in their studies in upper classes. This would consequently force some of these to drop from school before they attaining their permanent literacy skills

However, these results also show that there was some improvement made from one data collection period to the other in literacy skill development through Chichewa. Boys showed more improvement than the girls did. For instance, the results of the baseline survey show that the 83.7 percent of the boys who were at non-mastery in Feb 1999 reduced to 68.percent at the end of grade 2 in October 1999, whereas the 94.1 percent of the girls who were at non-mastery level in February 1999 only improved to 87.1 percent at the end of that academic year



Levels of literacy skills development through Chichewa by home language

Descriptive analysis of the data on reading also compares home language differences in literacy skill acquisition of cohort 2 pupils (i.e grade 2 pupils at baseline) over a period of 2 years. The findings from the baseline study established the baseline level of literacy skill acquisition for the pupils of different home language groups. As shown in the table below, there were many children (87.5 percent of the Chiyao and 90.3 percent of Chichewa speaking children) who entered grade 2 they were able to decode words in Chichewa. What is of interest here is the fact that there were more Chichewa L1 speakers who could not decode Chichewa words in a text of about forty words at the time they entered grade 2. Also, of equal interest, is the fact that there were more Chiyao speaking children (8 percent) during the baseline survey who demonstrated full mastery of reading (decoding words) in Chichewa than the L1 speakers of Chichewa (4.2 percent) did. However, the investigations also show that there were more L1 Chichewa speakers (17.7%) compared to only 51.9 percent of

Chiyao children who demonstrated full comprehension of the text that they had read in Chichewa during the baseline survey

During the follow-up studies that were done in October 1999, the researchers reassessed the same pupils that they had assessed during the baseline survey. This was the time when these children were about to complete their grade 2 literacy studies. The results of this follow-up study show that there were still many children (76.2 percent of the Chiyao and 79.7 percent of the Chichewa speaking children) who could not decode any words from their grade level Chichewa text of about forty words. However, this was an improvement from the baseline results. Like in the baseline survey, more Chiyao speaking children also demonstrated full mastery of reading (decoding) Chichewa at the exit of this grade level. Also, like during the baseline survey, there were more L1 Chichewa speakers (23.9 percent) who comprehended what they had read as opposed to only 23.7 percent of the Chichewa speakers during this follow-up survey

In, October 2000, the same baseline children were once again assessed on their levels of literacy development through Chichewa. This was the time that these pupils were completing their grade 3 literacy programme. During this study these children were asked to read a text of their grade level (that is a grade 3 Chichewa text). In addition they were also asked to read a text of lower grade level (that is a grade 2 Chichewa text) Besides, these children were also asked 4 comprehension questions on each text that they read. On their levels of reading development, the investigations showed that there some pupils at the end of grade 3 in both home language groups (60.9 percent of the Chiyao and 61.8 percent of L1 Chichewa speakers) who could not read a text of lower grade level. However, unlike in the previous surveys, there were now more L1 Chichewa speakers (36.1 percent) as opposed to 34.9 percent of the Chiyao speakers who demonstrated full mastery of a lower grade level Chichewa text. Like in the previous surveys, also, there were more L1 Chichewa speakers (37.9 percent) as opposed to 28.6 percent of the Chiyao speakers who demonstrated full comprehension of what they had read in the passage of lower grade level by answering all the questions.

Cohort 2 Chichewa mastery levels by home language

Home language	Level of mastery	Feb 1999	Oct 1999	Oct 2000
Chiyao	Non mastery (0-30)	87.5%	76.2%	61.8%
	Partial mastery (31-79)	4.5%	6.0%	3.3%
	Full mastery (80+)	8.0%	17.9%	34.9%
Chichewa	Non mastery (0-31)	90.3%	79.7%	60.9%
	Partial mastery (31-79)	5.5%	6.3%	3.0%
	Full mastery (80+)	4.2%	13.9%	36.1%

Writing in Chichewa

During each of the three surveys, children were given some writing exercises in Chichewa. These exercises included writing their own names and other words in Chichewa that the children already knew. The purpose of asking pupils to do these writing exercises was to find out what they can write on their own in Chichewa.. On writing their own name, the results of these investigations show that at baseline only 47.8 percent of L1 Chichewa speakers and 46.6 percent Chiyao speakers wrote their names. In the October 1999 follow-up survey, which was at the end of grade 2 these children were asked to write their names again. These investigations showed that 64.0 percent of L1 Chichewa speakers were now able to write their names whereas 62.2 percent of the Chiyao speakers wrote their names. However, these results show that a lot from both language groups entered grade before they could write their own names.

In October, 2000 which was towards the of their grade 3 academic year, the same children who were assessed in February 1999 were followed once again During this survey, the children were asked to write down their names again. The results of survey showed that there

were now 85.3 percent of L1 Chichewa speakers and 81.5 percent of the Chiyao speakers who could write their names. These results show improvement in the development of children's ability to write in Chichewa. Although there were some differences in the levels of writing their own names between the L1 Chichewa speakers and the Chiyao speakers the differences were at most very minimal.

Besides asking the children to write their own names, they were also asked to write any words that they already knew in Chichewa. During this investigation, every child was given a maximum of 10 minutes to any word in Chichewa. Like writing names the purpose of this exercise was to find out the number of words that they could in a period of 10 minutes. Children who wrote 10 words and more in 10 minutes were asked to write a paragraph in Chichewa that took the form of a letter. The results of this investigation showed that 58.3 percent of L1 Chichewa speakers and 60.2 percent of Chiyao speakers could not write even a single word during the baseline survey. Only 1.8 percent L1 Chichewa speakers and 2.0 percent of the Chiyao speakers wrote about 5 words. During the October 1999 follow-up survey when the academic year was coming to an end, there were still 45.3 percent of L1 Chichewa speakers and 50.3 percent of the Chiyao speakers could not write any words in Chichewa. Also, the investigations show that there were only 4.7 percent of L1 Chichewa and only 3.6 percent of the Chiyao speakers who wrote about 5 words in Chichewa.

In October 2000 these children were asked once again to write words that they already knew in Chichewa. The results of this investigation show that there were some children (26.8 percent of L1 Chichewa speakers and 29.1 percent of the Chiyao speakers) who were unable to write any word in Chichewa at this grade level. Only 6.3 percent of the L1 Chichewa speakers and 3.1 of the Chiyao speakers wrote about 5 words in Chichewa.

Discussion

These findings lead to more questions-Why are many pupils of different home language groups failing to read in Chichewa in grade 2? Why do pupils fail to write their own name up to grade 3? Why are more girls failing to read in both Chichewa? Why are some pupils in grade 2 and 3 unable to write any words in Chichewa? These are some of the questions whose answers need to be investigated if levels of literacy through Chichewa are to be raised

by the time our children complete grade 4. There are, however, some hints that are coming out from other IEQ research findings on teachers and instructional materials that are used for equipping children with permanent literacy skills through both Chichewa. For instance, many of teachers in these schools are Junior Certificate of Education (J.C.E.) holders and are untrained as teachers. Many teachers reported that they do not have in-service courses in their schools. Some teachers reported about shortage of pupils' books for Chichewa. Pupils read only one textbook of Chichewa the whole year. Some pupils are not allowed to take books home. Some schools are understaffed. The list goes on. Can these be some of the reasons for the low levels of literacy amongst our children?

Conclusion

How far can the children in grades 1 through to 4 read and write in Chichewa? How much are the children from different home language groups able to read and write in Chichewa? These are some of the questions whose answers IEQ researchers have been investigating during the 1999 and 2000 academic years in Mangochi and Balaka districts. Findings from these investigations show that many pupils cannot read and write in both Chichewa and English. The findings also show that many L1 Chichewa and Chiyao speakers complete grade 2 without being able to read nor write in Chichewa. This state of affair can likely frustrate many of the learners at this grade level. The consequences may be that many children may be forced to repeat classes or dropout early from school. There is, therefore, a need for appropriate strategies to be put in place in order to raise the levels of literacy skill acquisition of all the children at this stage of learning. This may necessitate reviewing our policy and practice on training of language teachers for the infant and junior primary schools. In addition, this may require us to review our policy on quality and variety of instructional materials that need to be used for developing literacy skills in our children at classroom level.

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