



**IEQ/Malawi: A Partnership between Malawi Institute of Education and Save the Children Federation USA/Malawi Field Office**

---

## **SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN MALAWI**

**Paper presented at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) 2000 Conference  
San Antonio, Texas, USA  
8 – 12 March 2000**

**by  
Henri G Chilora  
Researcher  
Malawi/IEQ II Project**



---

**Supported by the  
United States Agency for International Development**

# **SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN MALAWI**

## **Introduction**

Malawi is a country that is in the southern part of Africa. It is a small stretch of land that extends from 11 to 37 degrees South of the Equator and from about 33 to 36 degrees East. It is about 837 kilometers. It shares borders with Zambia to the West, Tanzania to the North and Mozambique to the East and Southwest.

Malawi's population is estimated at 10 million with an annual growth rate of 2.2% (National Statistical Office: 1998). Almost 50% of this population is under the age of 15. However % of Malawi's school-going age do go to school. The school dropout rate is %.

Malawi has over 16 local languages (see Appendix for some of the languages). However, not all these languages are used as school languages in the education system. The illiteracy rate in Malawi is one of the highest in Southern Africa at 58% (UNICEF: 1993). This paper discusses Malawi's school language policy. It also discusses the manner in which this policy has been implemented and some of the findings on the current school language policy that were obtained from the research which IEQ/Malawi carried out in 1999 in 65 schools in Mangochi and Balaka districts of the Southern Malawi.

## **School Language Policy**

The current school language policy in Malawi can be traced back to the country's colonial period. Before Malawi attained independence from the British in 1964, vernacular language was widely used as a medium of instruction especially in the first two to three years of primary education. Mchazime (1996) says that during this period, Chichewa, then known as Chinyanja was widely used as a medium of instruction in Central and Southern regions of the country, whereas Chitumbuka was the medium of instruction in the northern region. This was the time when education was largely in the

hands of missionaries whose main goal was to teach the indigenous people of Malawi to read the Bible in their own language.

At certain stages during the colonial era, some attempts were made to elevate Chichewa as the national language on the basis that it was spoken by the majority of people in central and Southern regions. These attempts were, however, crushed by some senior colonial government officials who were afraid that the Africans might unite and undermine their rule. In addition, these attempts were opposed by some educated speakers of other vernacular languages who saw this as a deliberate move to sideline their languages. Therefore, for a long time vernacular languages remained as a medium of instruction in the early years of primary education.

### **Major Shift in School Language Policy**

After four years of Malawi's independence, in 1968, a major shift in school language policy was made. In this year Chichewa which was spoken by the majority of people in Malawi (see 1966 Census) was elevated to the status of a national language. The expressed aim for elevating Chichewa as a national language was to foster national unity (Chisala: 1966) in a small but multilingual society. In the same year, English was made an official language for government, education, press media, the judiciary and business. The choice of English as an official language was, understandably, based on the country's historical colonial past. For over half a century, Malawi had been under British rule during which English was instituted as a major language of communication within and with people from other countries.

As a national language, Chichewa became the only medium of instruction in all schools in Malawi from grade 1 through to 4. English took over as a medium of instruction from grade 5 onwards. In addition, both Chichewa and English were the only languages that were studied as school subjects from grade 1 through to university.

### **Impact of this Policy**

This school language policy made some impact on the education system in Malawi. For example, programmes for training teachers in the use of Chichewa as a medium of instruction were developed and implemented in all teacher training colleges. Some attempts were also made to standardize the orthography of Chichewa (Chichewa Board; 1980). In addition, in 1989 government approved that all pupils books for grades 1 to 4, except those of English, should be written in Chichewa (Mchazime: 1996). What this meant was that pupils' books for subjects such as Mathematics and General Studies had to be written in Chichewa. The accompanying teachers' guides were, however, written in English. This was done to give further information in English as a back-up to those teachers whose knowledge of Chichewa was not as strong.

One scenario that was created by this school language policy was that it was being implemented by some teachers who could not speak Chichewa fluently because it was not their vernacular language. The result was that many of such teachers tended to give instruction in a local language other than Chichewa which they were familiar with and only switched to Chichewa when officials entered their classrooms (Ministry of Education: 1996).

### **New Directions in Malawi's Education System**

In 1994, government introduced free primary education (FPE). The expressed intention for doing this was to improve pupil access to school. This, as was intended, caused student enrolment to rise from 1.9 million to 3.2 million. However, this sudden rise in pupil enrolment exerted a lot of pressure on an already overburdened education system. For example,

- Teacher/pupil ratio increased from 1:35 to 1:60
- Classroom/pupil ratio increased from 1:60 to 1:120
- Textbook/pupil ratio increased from 1:2 to 1:4.

In order to alleviate teacher shortage, large numbers of untrained teachers had to be recruited.

In 1996 government announced an extension of the existing school language policy. In a letter that was circulated to all Regional Education Officers, District Education Officers and heads of other educational institutions, government stated that

“... with immediate effect all standards 1, 2, 3 and 4 classes in our schools be taught in their own mother tongue or vernacular language as a medium of instruction.” (Ref. No. IN/2/14)

According to a follow-up government press release on this new school language policy, vernacular language and mother tongue was defined as “language commonly spoken in the area where the school is located” (Ministry of Education: 1996). The reason that was given in this press release for making this extension to the school language policy was twofold. First, it was stated that this new language policy would give children an opportunity to participate fully in classroom discussions using a language that they are more familiar with than to struggle in a language that they are just learning. The press release further stated that the posting of teachers in the country was not going to be affected by this new policy. Teachers were still going to be posted according to the need of a particular region or district and not necessarily because they speak the language of the area where the school is located.

### **Scenarios Created by the New Policy**

One scenario that has been created by this new language policy is that children in grades 1 to 4 are learning some subjects in multilingual. This is so because the books that the children are using are still written in Chichewa but the teachers’ guides and lesson plans are written in English while the delivery of the lesson is in the mother tongue or vernacular language.

On the other hand, this new school language policy has created a scenario in which some teachers are teaching in schools that are located in areas whose common language they do

not know. This, therefore, forces teachers to give instruction to children in a language that is not commonly spoken in the area of the school, thus contravening the policy.

### **Gains made from these New Directions**

The introduction of Free Primary Education has tremendously improved pupil access to schools. A larger proportion of children in Malawi now go to school than was the case before. Moreover, with the introduction of the new school language policy children are now able to learn in a language that they are more familiar with.

This has been a welcome development in our education system. However, as the Malawi Minister of Education, Sports and Culture pointed out in his opening remarks of the National Seminar on Education Quality, improving pupil access to school alone cannot be meaningful if the relevance and quality of the education which children receive in schools are not tackled. It is on this basis that Malawi, in collaboration with donor agencies has now embarked on the challenge of improving education quality in the country.

### **Research on Quality Education**

The scenarios created in our education system by the introduction of Free Primary Education in 1994 and a new language policy two years later could have affected the quality of education in one way or the other in our schools. It was on this understanding that the IEQ Project in partnership with the Malawi Institute of Education and Save the Children Federation Inc. (US) set out to investigate, among others, language related issues such as:

- What language do pupils speak at home?
- What language do teachers speak?
- What are the qualifications of teachers
- How many teachers are unqualified?
- How much are pupils able to read, write and enumerate at the beginning and at the end of each level of learning?

- How do Chiyao and Chichewa speaking children differ in their performance in Mathematics, Chichewa and English?

This investigation was carried out in February and October 1999 in 65 schools in Mangochi and Balaka districts, both of which are predominantly Chiyao speaking areas.

The following were some of the findings:

- 64% of the pupils assessed in the survey speak Chiyao.
- 67% of the teachers interviewed in this survey indicated that they could not speak Chiyao.
- 75.6% of the teachers were JCE (two years of secondary education) holders.
- 61% of the teachers were unqualified.

These findings show that the new language policy in the area is being implemented by teachers, the majority of whom cannot speak the language of the area. In addition the majority of teachers who are implementing the new language are either under or unqualified as teacher.

**How Chichewa speaking Children differ form Chiyao speaking Children in their Performance in Mathematics**

The pupil assessment in Mathematics was partly intended to find out the effect that home language has in learning Mathematics.

**Table 1: Mathematics mastery in relation to home language**

<b>Standard</b>	<b>Home Language</b>	<b>February</b>	<b>October</b>	<b>Gain</b>
2	Chichewa	34.19%	42.28%	8.09%
	Chiyao	33.13%	39.42%	6.29%
3	Chichewa	46.63%	56.27%	9.64%
	Chiyao	45.36%	55.12%	9.76%
4	Chichewa	57.60%	65.84%	8.24%
	Chiyao	57.18%	63.30%	6.12%

The results in Table 1 show that the mean percentage score for Chichewa speaking children is higher than that of Chiyao speaking children both at the beginning and at the end of the academic year. However, the average performance by both groups of pupils was different.

### **How Chichewa speaking Children differ from Chiyao speaking Children in their Performance in English and Chichewa**

Like in Mathematics, the assessment on reading in Chichewa and in English was partly intended to find out the effect that home language has in learning to read in Chichewa and in English. The following were the results:

**Table 2: Chichewa Mastery in Relation to home Language**

Class	Home Language		Non Mastery	Partial Mastery	Full Mastery
Standard 2	Chichewa	Feb	90.2%	5.1%	4.7%
		Oct	79.9%	5.4%	14.8%
	Chiyao	Feb	87.5%	5.1%	7.4%
		Oct	77.0%	6.0%	17.0%
Standard 3	Chichewa	Feb	63.4%	9.9%	26.7%
		Oct	54.1%	13.8%	32.1%
	Chiyao	Feb	58.1%	8.6%	33.3%
		Oct	48.3%	6.7%	45%
Standard 4	Chichewa	Feb	21.1%	9.6%	69.3%
		Oct	18.1%	7.2%	74.7%
	Chiyao	Feb	22.4%	7.7%	69.9%
		Oct	14.3%	9.7%	76%

The results in Table 2 show that there was a gain in the level of Chichewa mastery by both Chichewa and Chiyao speaking children. However, Chiyao speaking children gain more than Chichewa speaking children in all the classes.

**Table 3: English Mastery in relation to Home language**

Class	Home Language		Non Mastery	Partial Mastery	Full Mastery
Standard 2	Chichewa	Feb	96.9%	2.1%	1.0%
		Oct	89.3%	7.0%	3.7%
	Chiyao	Feb	94.2%	4.9%	0.9%
		Oct	85.3%	8.9%	5.8%
Standard 3	Chichewa	Feb	79.0%	13.6%	7.4%
		Oct	67.1%	21.1%	11.8%
	Chiyao	Feb	83.5%	10.2%	6.3%
		Oct	65.1%	18.7%	16.3%
Standard 4	Chichewa	Feb	43.1%	24.0%	32.9%
		Oct	26.7%	26.7%	46.7%
	Chiyao	Feb	40.7%	22.8%	36.5%
		Oct	23.2%	22.2%	54.6%

Like in Chichewa, the results in Table 3 show that there was a gain in the level of English mastery by both Chichewa and Chiyao speaking children. However, Chiyao speaking children gain more than Chichewa speaking children in all the classes.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined the background to the current school language policy in Malawi. It has been discussed in this paper that the idea of elevating one of the local languages to the status of a national language was not only a post independence ambition. The colonial government made several attempts toward this goal. The impact and various scenarios that were created by previous school language policy have also been discussed. In addition, the paper has outlined the environment in which the current school language policy is being implemented. Finally this paper has discussed some of the findings on language related issues that were obtained from the research that IEQ/Malawi carried out at the beginning and toward the end of the 1999 school year.

### **References**



## MALAWI

### Republic of Malawi

#### □ GOVERNMENT:

- Democratic-Multiparty system
- Population: -----9,840,474
- Capital City: ----Lilongwe
- Independence:----July 6, 1964

#### GEOGRAPHY:

- Area: -----118,484 sq.km :  
45,747 sq mi
- Largest City(Est. pop)-----  
Blantyre (446,800)

#### PEOPLE:

- Official languages:-----  
English, Chichewa

#### □ VITAL STATISTICS:

- Birth Rate-----40/1000
- Literacy:----- 56%

#### ECONOMY:

- Monetary unit .....Kwacha
- Economy:----- Agricultural  
Products, tobacco, tea