

*Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project*

**Teacher and Pupil Home Language: Implications for Learning  
TEACHER'S HOME LANGUAGE VERSUS MOTHER  
TONGUE INSTRUCTION POLICY: SOME INSIGHTS  
FROM IEQ RESEARCH FINDINGS ON CHIYAO  
SPEAKING CHILDREN IN MANGOCHI AND BALAKA  
DISTRICTS**

*IEQ undertaken by:*

**American Institutes for Research**

**in collaboration with  
The Academy for Educational Development  
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# INTRODUCTION

The various researches that have been conducted on language in education have shown that children learn better during the early years of their primary education when the medium of instruction is in the language which they speak at home (Andoh-Kumi: 1999). These findings have generated an international concern on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in early years of primary. This is true especially in countries where for a long time a foreign language, usually the colonial language and in some cases the language of the majority ethnic group was used as a medium of instruction for all children in schools. This approach of honouring children's rights to learn in a language which they speak at home is now being reflected in school language policies of many countries. In Ghana, for example, their school language policy (see IEQ Interim Report: 2000) calls for the predominant Ghanaian language of an area to be used as a medium of instruction. As Andoh Kumi (2000:3) points out Ghana's current language policy of education states that:

*In the first three years of primary education, the Ghanaian language prevalent in the school area is to be used as a medium of instruction whilst English is studied as a subject. From Primary four, English replaces the Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction and the Ghanaian language is then treated as just another subject on the timetable.*

Hong Kong is another country that has shown her willingness to honour her children's rights to learn in a language of their homes. After being under the British Colonial rule for well over 150 years, Hong Kong's new school language policy requires Chinese to replace English as a medium of instruction not only during the early years of primary education but even in secondary schools (Cheung and Randall: 2000:2).

Malawi which has more than fifteen languages (see Mchazime: 1996 and Kathewera: 1999) is another country which has adopted the policy of mother tongue instruction in the early grades of its primary education system. In a letter that was circulated to all Regional Education Officers, District Education Officers and heads of educational institutions, government directed that

*.... With immediate effect all standards 1, 2, 3 and 4 children in our schools be taught in their mother tongue or vernacular as a medium of instruction.  
(Ref. No. IN/2/4 dated 28 March, 1996).*

This circular letter was followed by another government release (see "The Nation" of 25 June 1996) which, while confirming the introduction of a new school language policy, upheld an existing policy on teacher posting. According to this release, teachers are still going to be posted to schools according to the need of a particular region or district and not necessarily because they speak the language of the area in which the school is located. This policy on teacher posting ignores the roles which teachers

play in the implementation of any educational reform at classroom level (also see Littlewood: 1981:19 and Wright: 1987:6). A disconnect seems to exist between the new school language policy and the policy on teacher posting. This is so because in a multilingual society like Malawi, as Kaphesi (1994:4) argues, it is not easy to find a teacher who may be competent in all the major languages that are the home languages of the various school children. This paper therefore discusses some of the IEQ research findings on the impact that teacher's home language may have on pupils learning in a mother tongue.

## **RESEARCH ON QUALITY EDUCATION**

In 1994 a major reform of primary education was made in Malawi. In this year government introduced Free Primary Education (FPE). The expressed intention for doing this was to improve pupil access to school. This, as was intended, saw 1.3 million additional children enrolling for primary education. However, this sudden rise in pupil enrolment exerted a lot of pressure on an already overburdened education system. For example (also see Ministry of Sports and Culture: 1998 and Jere et al: 2000):

- 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 were recruited. These were given a 2 to 3 week orientation course before they were assigned to schools where their services were needed most. Like the other teachers these new recruits received no training in using mother tongue as a medium of instruction.

The Malawi government made another major reform in primary education in 1996. As has already been pointed out in this paper a new school language policy which required pupils to learn in a language which they speak at home was introduced. These two major reforms of our education system created some scenarios that might have affected the quality of education which children receive in schools. It is on this understanding that Malawi, in collaboration with donor agencies such as USAID embarked on formidable challenges of improving the quality of education in the country while meeting the tremendous demand (Jere et al: 1999:11)

In January 1999, with funding from USAID, the Quality Education Through Supporting Teachers (QUEST) project was launched in Mangochi by Save the Children Federation (US). One of the objectives of QUEST was to enhance education quality in schools. In order to achieve this objective the QUEST project initially planned to conduct targeted research with the purpose of establishing the

positions of schools and guiding project interventions. Through collaborations with IEQ project and USAID a partnership was formed between the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) and Save the Children Federation (USA) with the purpose of expanding the research and its potential to inform and guide national policy. Of particular interest to stakeholders were questions related to language of education.

It was against this background that the Improving Education Quality (IEQ) project in partnership with the Malawi Institute of Education and Save the Children Federation (US) with funding from USAID set out on a longitudinal study to investigate, among others, issues related to language such as:

- What are the academic and professional qualifications of teachers in the target area?
- What professional support do teachers receive?
- What language do the teachers speak at home?
- What language do pupils in the target area speak at home?
- What medium of instruction is used in the target schools?
- How do Chiyao children perform in Mathematics, English and Chichewa when they are taught by a Chiyao speaking teacher and a teacher who speaks other languages?

This investigation was carried out during the 1999 school year in two districts in Malawi, both of which are predominantly Chiyao speaking areas. The sample included standards 2, 3, and 4 in 65 schools. In each class, boys and girls were randomly selected for inclusion. Their teachers, headteachers, and community leaders participated in the study as well. In February, shortly after the beginning of the school year, schools were visited and data were collected from 2000 pupils, 188 teachers, 65 headteachers, and at least one community group per school. Near the end of the school year, in October, researchers returned to the 65 schools and reassessed 1508 of the original pupils (75.4%). Data were once again collected from headteachers, teachers, and community members.

In order to conduct this study, data collection instruments were developed on crucial issues that were seen as indicators of quality education. Pupil achievement instruments, which were curriculum based, were aimed at assessing pupils' performance in Mathematics, English and Chichewa. Interview instruments were developed for teachers, headteachers, pupils and the community in order to collect data on various areas that are indicators of quality education for children. In addition, lesson planning and observation instruments were developed in order to collect data on actual classroom practice, which is also another indicator of quality education.

The instruments were pilot tested at two schools in Mangochi in February 1999 before they 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.

Data were collected over three week periods in February and October. The research teams which comprised one observer, 3 assessor, one interviewer and one logistician spent 3 days to complete collecting data at each school. Following collection, data were coded, entered into the computer and analyzed. What follows, therefore, are some of the findings on language related issues.

## **FINDINGS ON TEACHERS' ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS**

Data on teachers' academic and professional qualifications was collected through asking teachers to state their qualifications. These investigations reveal that 75.6% of teachers in the survey are Junior Certificate of Education holders (i.e. two years of secondary school education). In addition, the investigations reveal that the majority of teachers in the survey (61%) are not qualified as teachers.

## **FINDINGS ON TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT**

Data on professional support which teachers receive was collected by asking teachers to report the number of in-service courses they had attended over a period of three years and the number of times they were supervised by a Primary Education Advisors (PEA) during the academic year.

On in-service courses attended (see also Save the Children (US): 2000: 8) as at October 1999, 7% of the teachers interviewed reported that they had never attended any INSET, whereas 20% said that they only attended one INSET, 25% two INSETs and the rest three INSETs or more.

The investigations also suggest that the supervision of teachers by PEAs was not regular. Of the 188 teachers interviewed, 15% reported that they had not been supervised by a PEA at all, 20% reported that they were supervised once while the rest said that they were supervised more than once.

## **FINDINGS ON TEACHERS' HOME LANGUAGE**

During the interview, teachers were asked to report the languages which they speak at home and to rate their proficiency in the other languages. The results show that 67% of the teachers interviewed in the survey indicate that they could not speak Chiyao at all which is the predominant language of this area. The majority of these teachers (96%) however reported that they could speak Chichewa, which is currently the national language, without any difficulty.

## **FINDINGS ON PUPILS' HOME LANGUAGE**

Data on pupil's home language was collected through asking pupils to mention the language they speak at home. During this interview pupils were asked to report on the language which they speak at home. The majority of the pupils (64%) indicated that they speak Chiyao, whereas 35% of the pupils reported that they speak Chichewa and only 1% said that they speak other languages.

## **FINDINGS ON INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS**

During the survey, instructional materials that are used for teaching Mathematics, English, Chichewa and General Studies were physically counted. This investigation revealed that a good number of the schools that were visited had teachers' guides for these four core subjects. However, some schools did not have the Teachers' Guides for these subjects (10% for Mathematics, 3% for English, 14% for Chichewa and 9% for General Studies). It was also found that pupils' books (see books published by MIE: 1994) for General Studies and Mathematics are written in Chichewa whereas their accompanying Teachers' Guides are written in English. Moreover all the lesson plans, except those of Chichewa are written in English.

# **FINDINGS ON THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN STANDARDS 1 TO 4**

The data on medium of instruction was collected through interviews with headteachers of all the 65 schools in Mangochi and Balaka districts. During this interview, headteachers were asked to identify the languages that are used for instruction in standards 1 - 4 in their school. Headteachers could give more than one language as medium of instruction in their schools. Chichewa was given as one of the languages of instruction by 85% of the headteachers. Chiyao was given by 32%. A closer look at the pupils whose home language is Chiyao indicated that only 43% of these pupils were in schools where Chiyao was not mentioned by the headteacher as a language of instruction in standards 1 - 4.

In addition to headteacher interview, teachers were observed while teaching English, Chichewa, and Mathematics. One of the rated features in this observation was: "Teacher uses mother tongue to help the learner grasp a point being made." It was observed that the majority of teachers seen (54.5% in mathematics, 33.2% in English and 55.7% in Chichewa) do not use mother tongue to help the learners grasp a point being made in that lesson. However, a closer look at the pupils whose home language is Chiyao indicated the following:

- Yao pupils whose teachers used mother tongue to help the pupil grasp a point performed better in English reading, and comprehension (standard 4 only), and in Mathematics (standard 2 only) than Yao pupils whose teachers were weak in using or never used mother tongue to help the learner grasp a point.
- On the other hand, Yao pupils whose teachers used mother tongue during Chichewa lessons performed less well in Chichewa reading and comprehension than Yao pupils whose teachers did not use mother tongue for Chichewa instruction. (This may reflect the classroom mixture - teachers not using mother tongue during Chichewa instruction may be doing so because more pupils in the class were competent in Chichewa - thus the Yao pupils would be in classes with Chichewa pupils and have more opportunities to master Chichewa.

# FINDINGS ON CHIYAO PUPILS' PERFORMANCE WHEN TAUGHT BY A CHIYAO TEACHER AND A TEACHER WHO SPEAKS OTHER LANGUAGES

One area which was investigated during this study is the percentage of Chiyao speaking pupils who are taught by teachers whose home language is Chiyao. This was done by asking both pupils and teachers in the sample about the language that they commonly speak at home. This investigation reveals that pupils in the study whose home language was Chichewa were very likely to have a teacher whose home language was Chichewa. This was true for about 76% of the Chichewa pupils. On the other hand, pupils whose home language was Chiyao were not likely to have a teacher whose home language was Chiyao. Only 29% of the Yao pupils in the study had teachers whose home language was Chiyao (30% for standard 2, 17% for standard 3, and 29% for standard 3).

Pupil performance in Mathematics, English and Chichewa by Chiyao speaking children is another area that was investigated during the study. Of particular interest was the performance of Chiyao speaking children who were taught by Chiyao speaking teachers and teachers who speak other languages.

This was done by giving pupils in the target classes tests in Mathematics, English and Chichewa. The investigation reveals that Chiyao speaking pupils who are taught by Chiyao speaking teachers do much better in Mathematics in grade 2 than Chiyao speaking children who are taught by speakers of other languages. In grades 3 and 4, however, the difference in their performance in Mathematics is not quite significant. This trend is also revealed in English performance. As shown in the table below Chiyao pupils who are taught by Chiyao teachers read English with greater accuracy than Chiyao pupils who are taught by non-Yao teachers.

**Average English Reading Accuracy for Chiyao Pupils**

Grade	Teacher Home Language	Mean
2	Chiyao	18.93
	Chichewa	20.71
3	Chiyao	28.07
	Chichewa	39.19
4	Chiyao	38.96
	Chichewa	43.78

In Chichewa however, the difference between the performance of Chiyao pupils taught by Chiyao teachers and Chiyao pupils taught by non-Chiyao teachers is insignificant compared to their differences in Mathematics and English.

## **SOME LESSONS FOR MOTHER TONGUE POLICY DECISION MAKERS**

These findings suggest that there is a disconnect between the home language of the teachers and that of the pupils (67% of non Chiyao speaking teachers as opposed to 61% of Chiyao speaking pupils). Such a disconnect may have some implications for the successful implementation of the mother tongue instruction policy in early years of primary education. This was observed during the implementation of the preceding policy of instruction in Malawi in which Chichewa was used as a medium of instruction for standards 1 to 4 in all schools. Although teachers received some support in the form of instructional materials that were written in Chichewa and the formal training they received in using Chichewa as a medium of instruction (Mchazime: 1996) there were still many teachers who gave instruction in a local language other than Chichewa, which they were familiar with and only switched to Chichewa when Ministry of Education Officials entered their classrooms (Ministry of Education: 1996). A similar problem was also observed in Ghana. As Andoh-Kumi (2000:3) reports, teachers who could not speak a pupil's home language had to use English as a medium of instruction for teaching subjects such as mathematics.

The lesson that may be learned from this is that the professional preparation of teachers is needed for a mother tongue instruction policy to be successfully implemented (see also Kathewera: 1999 and Mchazime: 1999). Moreover in countries, such as Malawi, where teacher's home language may be different from those of the learners, an appropriate teacher posting policy needs to be put in place so that mother tongue instruction policy is successfully implemented.

Another disconnect that these findings suggest is between the teacher's home language, the pupil's home language and the language used in instructional materials. The implication that this has is that children in grades 1 to 4 may be learning some subjects in three or more different languages. This is so because the books that they read are still written in Chichewa, the teachers prepare their lessons in English (except in Chichewa) and teach them using a local language which may be the children's home language or another vernacular (Chilora: 2000). Thus the children may be exposed to Chichewa, English, the teachers' home language and their home language in one lesson. Obviously this does not make learning any easier.

These findings also show that the majority of teachers in this target area are unqualified (61%). In addition, not much professional support (in the form of in-service training and supervision) is given to these teachers. This state of affairs may have a disastrous effect on the implementation of not only a language policy reform but also the implementation of any educational reform at classroom level. Therefore if a policy on mother tongue instruction in early years of primary education is to succeed, there is a need to have a team of teachers who are competent in the pupils' home language and qualified in classroom practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has discussed some major reforms that have been made in primary education in Malawi. The paper has suggested that a disconnect seems to exist between the mother tongue instruction policy and teacher posting policy. This disconnect is affecting the successful implementation of mother tongue instruction policy in Mangochi and Balaka where the majority of pupils speak Chiyao. The paper has therefore suggested that appropriate measures which may ensure the successful implementation of a mother tongue instruction policy be put in place. Otherwise we may have a beautiful policy on paper which no one may implement at classroom level.

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