

Literacy, Ethnolinguistic Diversity and Transitional Bilingual Education in Malawi

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This paper examines recent attempts by the Malawi government to introduce local languages into the primary school system and other secondary domains of national life, breaking more than 30 years of Chichewa/English monopoly. In a country where the language policy has essentially established the hegemony of English over indigenous languages, the fundamental question that this policy must consider should revolve around the role that these languages can play in the development of Malawi(ans) from a traditionally oral to an increasingly literate culture, ever more connected to the international community through the English language. For many Malawians, economic success is predicated on one's ability to speak, read and write English. There are, therefore, enormous attitudinal, political, economic and social problems that the policy has to contend with.

Keywords: bilingual education, language policy, literacy, Malawi

Introduction

This paper reviews the language-in-education policy in Malawi that attempts to implement a more comprehensive form of transitional bilingual educational (TBE) system in which indigenous languages, apart from Chichewa, will be introduced in the lower primary school. Until this change in the policy, English and Chichewa have been the only languages used as media of instruction in the schools of Malawi. The primary reasons advanced by the Ministry of Education in support of this policy change are largely based on the 1953 UNESCO report that stipulates that children learn better and faster when taught in their own mother tongue or in their own vernacular language during the first four years of their education (see Secretary for Education's letter, Ref. No. IN/2/14, dated 28 March 1996). Through this policy, the government also intends to recognise ethnolinguistic diversity in the new political dispensation; to undertake linguistic and cultural preservation; and to instil a sense of pride in the pupils in their ethnic identities. The use of language policies to promote cultural and linguistic diversity seems to be a common trend in developing nations. As Suresh (1989: 6) points out, due to the rapid socioeconomic changes taking place in the world, family structures and social organisation have generally loosened, leaving language as the major identity marker and the only window to the cultural past of a people. The demand for the recognition of minority languages and their use in education, administration and mass communication draws strength from this situation.

TBE is an attempt to facilitate learning through the use of two languages, each of which is utilised at an appropriate stage of learning. Ideally, the TBE system serves children who need to learn certain subjects or concepts in their native language in classes or educational systems in which a second language is used as a language of instruction and some of the pupils in such classes may not be adequately proficient in that instructional language at that stage of their education. In such bilingual programmes, pupils also have classes in which the second language is used as a language of instruction and also taught as a subject. The second language becomes the language of classroom instruction only when the students have acquired enough competence to grasp ideas and concepts relayed to them in this second language.

Malawi uses a TBE system in the junior primary classes akin to the system described above. The language of instruction from standard 1 through 4 is Chichewa, the national language and lingua franca, while English, the official language, is taught as a subject. English becomes the language of classroom instruction from standard 5 while Chichewa is reduced to a subject of study. In a typical TBE system the students would be taught in their native language. In Malawi, given the pervasiveness of Chichewa as a lingua franca and as the national language, coupled with the political support it has enjoyed, it has been assumed over the years that all students have a native or near-native competence in Chichewa. Chichewa has, therefore, been the only indigenous language used in the school system.

In the restructured TBE system, pupils in the lower primary school classes will be taught in their indigenous languages (if these languages are different from Chichewa). English will continue to be studied as a subject in these classes. This new system is not very different from the old system except that Chichewa will not be the only indigenous language used in these lower classes. This educational policy, which is yet to be implemented, is a short step to a new and deliberate emphasis on diversity in education. It is hoped that the new approach will achieve a higher literacy rate in both English and the indigenous languages.

This paper argues that efforts to restructure TBE must be linked to issues of literacy and socioeconomic development of the country in general. Some of the fundamental questions that this paper addresses include whether literacy in the indigenous languages is feasible in the context of Malawi's ethnolinguistic diversity and socioeconomic setting, and how this new policy would contribute to the development of Malawi(ans) from a traditionally oral to an increasingly literate culture, ever more connected to the global community through the English language. The paper discusses the challenges that are likely to militate against the success of the system if and when it is implemented.

Malawi's Linguistic Profile

Malawi has more than 14 Bantu languages (National Statistics Office (NSO), 1966; Stubbs, 1972). The majority languages are Chichewa (also known as Chinyanja), with 50.2% of the population claiming to be native speakers; Chilomwe, with 14.5%; Chiyao with 13.8%; and Chitumbuka with 9.1%. The

other languages have less than 4% of speakers and include Chisena, Chikhokhola, Chitonga, Chingoni, Chinkhonde, Chilambya, Chisukwa, Chinyakyusa, Chimambwe, Chibandia, Chinyiha and Chindali. The 1966 census also noted that Chichewa is the most understood language (76.6%). Given the almost one-to-one correspondence between language and ethnic group, the number of languages enumerated in the census roughly represents the number of indigenous ethnic groups in Malawi.

Based on these figures, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) government, through its annual convention of 1968, recommended that (1) Malawi should adopt Chinyanja as a national language; (2) the name Chinyanja be changed to Chichewa; and (3) Chichewa and English should be the official languages of the state of Malawi and all other languages should continue to be used in everyday private life in their respective areas (MCP, 1985). This new policy gave Malawi a three-language structure comprising *in-group languages*: the local vernaculars used in every day lives of Malawians; *out-group language(s)*: Chichewa, used in the market place and urban areas for communication between speakers of different vernaculars; and *languages of specialised information*: English, primarily used in formal/secondary domains of national life.

It should also be pointed out that although the language policy seemed to be motivated by the demographic prominence of Chichewa speakers in the country, some scholars (see Chirwa, 1994/95; Kayambazinthu, 1995; Matiki, 1998; Mchombo, 1998; Vail & White, 1989) have speculated that the policy was in fact influenced by Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's first President, who was a Chewa by tribe. Kishindo (1998: 277) notes, for instance, that

Dr. Banda thus appropriated Chichewa as a national language to mark the ascendancy to political prominence of the Chichewa speaking people of the Central Region. In Dr. Banda's scheme of things the symbolic value of Chichewa was arguably paramount.

The language patterns in Malawi also show that there is a close link between one's language and one's ethnic identity. While this relationship may still be the case in the rural areas, except among the Lomwe and the Ngoni, who are undergoing language shift, such a claim does not hold in urban and semi-urban areas where Chichewa predominates. The majority of families in the towns and cities have effectively shifted to Chichewa as the unmarked choice. For the children in such urban families, there is very little opportunity to learn either of their parents' native language if it is different from the dominant language. Ethnic identity also becomes less than transparent in such families. Consequently, although bilingualism among Malawians has been the norm rather than the exception, this linguistic pluralism in the local languages is being reduced, at least in the urban areas, through the process of cultural accretion, interethnic marriages and intense social interactions. It seems quite accurate to claim, therefore, that the predominance of Chichewa in Malawi and the attendant language shift, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, are leading to the neutralisation of the language/ethnic identity relationship.

Literacy in Indigenous Languages: Theory, Ideology and Practice

Literacy has always been an area of controversy in academic circles. While it has generally been accepted that literacy is a fundamental human right and a tool for both the modernisation and democratisation of society, there is very little agreement on what the real dynamics of literacy are. Some scholars (e.g. Bholá *et al.*, 1990; Blaug, 1985) argue that literacy does not necessarily improve life chances while others argue that it interferes with the preservation of oral discourse and traditional performances (see Elwert, 2001). This kind of ambivalence about the value of literacy is also clear from the work of Wagner (1999: 13) who noted, in his study of rural Morocco, that 'those with higher literacy tend to be better off economically, but also that an increasing number of parents believe that more education and more literacy will not necessarily lead to greater wealth'.

One of the reasons advanced by governments and other proponents of TBE for restructuring educational systems is to achieve a higher literacy rate and instil a sense of pride in the pupils in their ethnic identities. As Berriz (2000: 71) notes with respect to a bicultural classroom she teaches in the USA that promotes students' academic development in two languages, 'students must strengthen their sense of pride in their family culture while at the same time building skills to succeed in the mainstream culture'. Very often, however, this process is conceptualised and carried out without linking literacy in general to the socioeconomic development of the nation.

Slaughter's (1985) work seems to suggest that the principles that literacy promotes are at best inimical to the preservation of traditional cultural values because literacy leads to the secularisation of traditional systems. Slaughter (1985) provides some insights into the relationship between literacy, society and socioeconomic factors. Literacy, because of the nature of written language, promotes individualism rather than group experiences. In oral cultures people tend to be restricted in mobility; there is little emphasis on differentiation and individual consciousness, and there is a high degree of cultural conformity. Such settings are usually linguistically homogenous and there is very little or no demand at all to acquire other languages. In contrast, literacy by nature isolates the individual from the group. The individual invariably communicates with relative strangers and must acquire a language, usually the standard, that the people with whom he communicates will understand.

There are a number of social, economic and political factors that accompany the transition from an oral society to a literate one. Without making any claims to causality, Slaughter (1985: 123–124) postulates that there must be movement from: (1) endogamous relations to exogamous, from private to public domains; (2) group identity to individual consciousness and isolated activity; (3) traditional to new ideas and awareness; (4) homogeneous information and knowledge with similar people to heterogeneous knowledge with strangers and others; (5) interpersonal to impersonal decontextualised functions in all kinds of discourse; (6) known to unknown audience requiring explicitness and explanation (autonomy) in discourse; and (7) 'home' to new locales, workplaces, markets.

The factors outlined above are part of the basic social transformations that are associated with literacy (also see Elwert, 2001). These factors show that a society that promotes mass literacy must be prepared to transform some of its traditional structures of rural life. As Rockhill (1993: 171) argues, 'the politics of literacy are integral to the cultural genocide of a people'. It is therefore a contradiction of sorts to plan to promote and reinforce the cultural and ethnic identities of a people through literacy. Two things are likely to happen: either the people acquire literacy skills in their indigenous languages but soon discover that they have no need for these skills in their rural settings or acquire the literacy skills and break away from their rural areas to other places such as urban areas where there is a high degree of social stratification and occupational specialisation and may require literacy skills.

Spolsky and Irvine (1982) have also shown that literacy in the vernacular is likely to be accepted if domains and functions for written communication exist prior to the introduction of the new writing system. Elwert (2001: 54) makes a similar point that 'literacy campaigns in those least developed countries which had no widespread tradition of written laws and/or holy books routinely failed'. Thus, without any domains in which writing and reading prove functional, there is little hope for the acceptance of the vernacular policy in education.

Economic factors also determine the success (or lack of it) of literacy programmes. It is common in developing nations to associate rural, traditional settings with subsistence agriculture while urban areas are associated with industrialisation and a market economy. As stated earlier, an extreme rural setting may have no need for literacy. Many scholars (Cressy, 1980; Oxenham, 1980; Slaughter, 1985) have shown that there is a high correlation between literacy and urbanisation and a market economy. An extreme position on this kind of correlation was expressed by Anderson and Bowman (1965) who argued that a country needs a national adult literacy rate of 80% to achieve rapid economic development. For minimal economic development, on the other hand, only a 40% literacy rate is required. While subsequent studies have generally been less than categorical with respect to the required literacy rates for economic development, it is abundantly evident in the literature that literacy rates are good indicators of the degree of economic development in most countries (Wagner, 1999). This, in a way, explains the disparity in literacy levels between developed and developing nations:

By the 1980s...about seven out of ten adults in the world were considered literate. The populations with the highest levels of literacy were in the most economically advanced nations... The poorer, developing nations had the highest rates of illiteracy. (*Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*, CD-ROM, 1997)

Thus, literacy is more appropriate when a society goes beyond subsistence, beyond the local. One of the reasons why a market economy requires what Street (1984: 171) calls 'commercial literacy' is that trading tends to take place over long distance and it is more economical for words to travel rather than men. The need for record keeping also places enormous demands on literacy.

In spite of numerous calls for policy change in education, particularly the need to introduce local languages as media of instruction (OAU, 1986; UNESCO, 1953), including declaring 1990 as the *International Literacy Year*, not much has been achieved. Experiments in local language education in Africa have generally been inconclusive. Going into detail about one case, Lockett (1990) shows how the Vuyani Educare Centre in South Africa has struggled with issues of attitudes and feasibility. The Centre is a project that was set up in 1987 to try to bridge the social gap that apartheid had created among the people. The project hoped to achieve this goal by promoting bilingualism in Xhosa and English. Two years later, it became apparent that the goal of bilingualism could not be achieved unless a number of problems were cleared out of the way. First, it was clear that not all the teachers assigned to teach at the centre were bilingual. This made the programme unrealistic and allowed English to become the dominant medium of classroom instruction.

Second, it became apparent that there were cultural differences among the staff members and between the staff and the parents. These differences became a source of tension and conflict. Third, there was lack of commitment and reinforcement by both parents and teachers because they did not fully understand the language issue. Finally, most of the parents did not see any economic incentive in learning or promoting the vernaculars.

Many other studies in Africa (see Adegbiya, 1994; Cluver, 2000; Mtenje, 2002; Musau, 2003) have also highlighted the negative attitudes that speakers generally have towards their own indigenous languages in the face of an economically and politically powerful second language. Adegbiya (1994) traces these negative attitudes to colonial times. Most colonial governments in Africa adopted language policies that conferred official status on colonial languages and excluded indigenous languages from important spheres of public communication. Such policies created, in the minds of the general public, the impression that African languages were inferior and less suitable for use at higher levels of national life. Many postcolonial governments in independent Africa have perpetuated these attitudinal misconceptions by uncritically adopting the colonial language policies.

Elsewhere, Spolsky and Irvine (1982: 74–77) use structural–functional factors to account for the acceptance of vernacular literacies in general. They posit a number of factors that are considered to ease the transition into vernacular literacy. Literacy in the vernacular is likely to be accepted if domains and functions for written communication predate the introduction of the new writing system. The people should perceive literacy as being in keeping with prevailing cultural knowledge and tradition. Values that come with literacy should also be continuous with pre-existing sociocultural beliefs. In other words, it is important that there should be domains in which literacy proves functional. Spolsky and Irvine (1982: 75–76) further note that ‘when the introduction of literacy is associated with a second language, an alien culture, and modern, technological functions, literacy in these new domains is preferred in the alien, second, or standard language.’

It will be interesting to assess the Malawi case against these sociological, economic and political factors and the extent to which the envisaged TBE system is feasible. It is to these issues that the discussion now turns.

Prospects for Indigenous Literacy in Malawi

In Malawi the call for vernacular education was, in recent times, made by Kulemeka (1994), who reiterated UNESCO's (1953) and OAU's (1986) stock arguments that resources would better be spent if the nation adopted indigenous languages for instruction in the schools. The major objective of indigenous language education is to promote literacy and content-area knowledge in the indigenous languages. As some scholars (Berriz, 2000; Farah, 2000; Guadarrama, 1993) point out, there is need in education to recognise that given the pupils' unique linguistic and cultural characteristics, they require different instructional and curricular approaches.

There are also other benefits of TBE, which are specific to Malawi. The use of indigenous languages in education will ensure that languages that until recently were not accorded any official recognition are brought to the fore of the national agenda. It will be necessary in this regard to standardise these minority languages by writing their orthographies, describing their grammars and ensuring that all other matters relating to their codification are in place.

As a matter of fact, this kind of recognition is already bearing dividends. In response to the need for wider consultation with regard to the implementation of the mother tongue policy, the Centre for Language Studies (CLS) has since 1996 undertaken a number of studies to determine the attitudinal acceptability of the various indigenous languages. The languages that were targeted in these studies were Chiyao in 1996, Chitumbuka in 1997, and Chilomwe and Chisena in 1998. The main objective of these surveys was 'to determine the acceptability, relevance and practicalities of using mother tongues or vernacular languages as media of instruction in primary schools' (CLS, 1999: 4). The surveys established that there is a general acceptance of each of the four languages surveyed among the speakers of each of these languages. The dominance of Chichewa was also apparent in these surveys. Almost all respondents cited Chichewa as their second language and in some cases as their first language. It was also the language that most respondents want to have in schools apart from their own mother tongues. The findings of these surveys were later presented and discussed at a national symposium on language-in-education policy, which endorsed the proposed mother tongue policy.

The official elevation of indigenous languages from the home domain to the school setting will in the long run help in reversing language shift (cf. Fishman, 1991) and halt the destabilisation that most of these languages have had to and continue to go through. For instance, Kishindo (1994) notes that the destabilisation of Chiyao, one of the languages in Malawi, has been facilitated by, among other factors, its non-use in the educational system. Kishindo argues that committing the minority languages to writing will give the speakers of such languages a sense of belonging to something of their own. Similar arguments have also been made on behalf of other minority languages in Malawi (see CLS, 1999; Kayambazinthu, 1995; Matiki, 1996/7).

It is clear then that the introduction of indigenous languages in the primary school curriculum makes a lot of academic sense and has, ideally, some benefits for the pupils, the ethnolinguistic groups whose languages are used in

the schools and the educational system as a whole. It is not clear whether Chichewa, as a national language, will continue to be taught as a compulsory subject in schools in which it is not the dominant indigenous language. In spite of the political will to implement the policy, there are some serious obstacles that are symptomatic of the pitfalls of adopting the TBE system to improve literacy and promote ethnic identities.

Challenges to Indigenous Literacy in Malawi

The implementation of TBE in Malawi is bound to face some enormous obstacles, one of which is the attitude of Malawians, in general, towards such a system. Malawians have come to regard Chichewa and English, particularly the latter, as the only economically viable languages in the school system. For many Malawians economic success is predicated on one's ability to speak, read and write English (Matiki, 2001). In a country where survival is a perpetual struggle, the value of any choice a person makes is, to a large extent, weighed in economic terms. As Laitin and Mensar (1991: 151) point out, 'people seem willing, at least on questions of small shifts in their language repertoires, to think of language shift in terms of the costs and benefits involved.' Given that the indigenous languages do not seem to have any apparent economic value, parents are not likely to support the wholesale introduction of indigenous languages in the school system.

As we noted earlier, Spolsky and Irvine (1982) have shown that literacy in the vernacular is likely to be accepted if domains and functions for written communication exist prior to the introduction of the new writing system. Domains in which writing and reading can prove functional are scarcely present in rural Malawi. It is in part for this reason that school enrolment in these areas lags far behind the urban areas and the dropout rates are also higher for the rural areas (NSO, 2002). It is only with respect to local leadership that literacy skills are increasingly becoming necessary because of the need to maintain contact with the local government. Given that only a few individuals can ascend to positions of leadership in rural areas, the aspiration to become a leader is not a strong motivation for acquiring literacy skills. Thus, without any domains in which writing and reading proves functional, there is very little hope for the acceptance of the vernacular policy in education.

In spite of the Ministry of Education having issued the directive for the introduction of mother tongue education in the primary school, its officials have been less than receptive to the policy. The draft language policy, which was drawn up by CLS and incorporated the proposed language-in-education directive, has lain unattended to by the ministry officials. This essentially means that there is no legal framework for the implementation of the policy. During the 3rd National Language Symposium organised by CLS, officials from the Ministry of Education were clearly at pains to explain why the ministry issued the directive on mother-tongue education but was not willing to implement it. It became apparent that the ministry was under political pressure to introduce a policy that was not well understood in Malawi.

Other reservations to the proposed mother-tongue policy have centred on people's fears that such a policy would seriously undermine the teaching of

English in the schools and that it would promote tribalism in the country. It should also be pointed out that there is a fundamental contradiction in the new system. It makes little sense to the average Malawian that the government is promoting vernacular education while at the same time maintaining English as 'the official vehicle and the magic formula to . . . elitedom' (Ngugi, 1986: 12). English continues to be the main determinant of a pupil's progress up the ladder of formal education. It is not a coincidence that Malawians, in general, equate education with one's ability and proficiency in English. Vernacular languages, on the other hand, are consistently represented as inferior to English. The continued maintenance and overt promotion of English language-based elitism perpetuates the feeling that indigenous languages are inferior to English (Matiki, 2001).

In spite of attempts by the Ministry of Education to explain its position on the issue, resentment against the policy continued unabated with the opposition politicians joining the fray to berate the government's lack of any sense of direction on the issue. It is not surprising that nine years later, all that the policy can show for are a couple of language symposia and not much on the ground. If the policy is to be implemented at all, then it will have to contend with such negative attitudes.

A compounding problem is that the majority of Malawians are poor and loathe what they see as the hypocrisy of the educational policy makers who send their children to private schools where none of the local languages are taught, but at the same time champion the introduction of local languages in the public schools. For instance, Banda (1996:3) writing in the *Daily Times* of September 7 (1996: 3) on the issue of the new language policy in schools quotes a parent as having said:

These leaders send all their children to private schools where they learn English from kindergarten to primary school while our children are going to non-paying schools where some teachers are not well trained. I propose that we maintain the two languages (English and Chichewa) for our schools.

Underlying all these reservations to the new language-in-education policy are the seemingly negative attitudes towards indigenous languages in general (see Adegbija, 1994; Cluver, 2000; McLaughlin, 1992; Musau, 2003). Owing to the colonial history of indigenous languages vis-à-vis English, the former have acquired rather negative attributes with respect to official domains, including education. While indigenous languages are generally valued for inter- and intraethnic communication and as markers of ethnic identity, they are not strong in facilitating education, and knowledge of national and world news, functions that are apparently reserved for English (Matiki, 2003).

In a study of language shift and maintenance among the Lomwe people of southern Malawi, Matiki (1996–97) noted, for example, that the Lomwe have a negative attitude towards their own native language, Chilomwe, as a medium of instruction at any level in the school system. For instance, only 30.8% ($n = 56$) of the respondents in the survey accepted the use of Chilomwe in schools against 52.1% ($n = 94$) who opted for Chichewa.

However, recent work by the CLS (1999) seems to indicate that the introduction of Chikomwe on the national radio has in recent years instilled a sense of pride in the Lomwe to the extent that they now want their language to be used in the school system.

The reaction of the public after the Ministry of Education released the directive on mother-tongue or vernacular education was also overwhelmingly negative. There were a lot of articles in the local newspapers in the country denouncing the vernacular educational policy as retrogressive. The policy was viewed as divisive and it was believed that teachers would be forced to go and teach in their regions of origin in order to make sure that the new school languages had teachers who were fluent in those languages. For instance, Nawela, writing in the *Nation* newspaper, (May 27, 1996) saw the new policy as 'hopeless and very expensive' and that it will 'corrupt the children completely... on tribal grounds'.

It is clear from this discussion that Malawi's language policy in recent years has generally been *ad hoc* and reflects political expediency rather than any serious attempt to increase literacy and to preserve ethnolinguistic diversity in the traditional sense of Fishman's (1991) 'reversing language shift' paradigm. Kishindo (1998: 267) poses a very pertinent question on this new twist to the language policy: 'What are the implications of catering for many languages which strengthen the separate linguistic and cultural identities while the country is suffering from seemingly divisive multi-party democratic politics?'

A related shortcoming that may further compound the attitudinal problem is parents' misconception and fear that such educational renovations are experimental and unproven. Very few parents would want to subject their children to experiments that do not promise any economic dividends. Inadequate parent and staff support of this new language policy in education is likely to hamper progress in the full implementation of the programme. The programme may be successful only if both parents and teachers see the restructuring process as comprehensive, far-reaching and beneficial.

Although the new policy implicitly suggests that the low literacy levels in Malawi, variably put between 42% and 50%, reflect the failure of the current language-in-education policy, it is probably more revealing to look at these figures as a reflection of the level of socioeconomic development of the country. As we noted earlier, there is a link between low literacy levels and a low national economy. Landlocked Malawi ranks among the world's least developed countries. With limited arable land and a growing population, the demand for non-agriculture-based sources of income is going to increase. This increase is already evident through the proliferation of financing institutions that are targeting the rural poor. This will consequently increase the demand for literacy, as more and more people will seek jobs in the urban areas. As the population moves to the urban areas, the need for indigenous languages becomes less and less as these new urbanites come under increasing pressure to acquire the dominant languages, Chichewa and English, for both social integration and political voice. It is already evident, for instance, that those who complete high school in rural areas 'do not remain in the rural

implemented soon after a new government took power in 1994. The government had to fulfil one of its campaign promises and went ahead with free primary education without any study and expert advice. Today, the government can hardly find the money to pay the thousands of unqualified teachers that it employed to serve the free primary school education.

In spite of the political will to implement the mother tongue policy in the schools, the problems that the policy faces are insurmountable in the current socioeconomic context. To begin with, the policy framework within which TBE is supposed to be introduced needs to be re-examined. As we noted earlier, the arguments that have been used in support of the policy have generally come from the UNESCO Report without contextualising these to the Malawian environment. As Street (1993) and Wagner (1999) have argued, literacy is a sociocultural phenomenon and is inextricably connected to power structures in society. Any intervention, therefore, should seriously incorporate the sociocultural contexts in which illiteracy and literacy are embedded.

The UNESCO Report, which was not as categorical as the Government proponents assert, essentially targeted, for the most part, educational systems which rely on postcolonial languages as media of education without any input from indigenous languages, particularly community languages. The case of Malawi is different in that Chichewa, a local indigenous language, a national language and a national lingua franca, is used in the school system. While it is generally accepted that effective learning cannot take place in an alien language, with more than 76% of Malawians understanding Chichewa, the language is hardly an alien language for the majority of Malawians. This percentage is even higher among the school-going population. The continued usefulness of Chichewa as a lingua franca and the apparent lack of a rival lingua franca can only strengthen its position and consequently exert pressure on most Malawians to learn it.

There has not been any study that has established that the use of Chichewa by non-ethnic Chewa students in the schools has had adverse effects. The only plausible explanation for mother-tongue education appears to be merely the ideological recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity of the country rather than any educational needs. Consequently, this issue should be investigated from the perspective of a more sophisticated sociolinguistic paradigm rather than the mother-tongue education one.

In the context of Malawi, with 86% of Malawians still living in rural areas where the need for literacy is not paramount and where subsistence agriculture is still the mainstay of livelihood, it is likely the case that the country has not reached the level of economic development that can viably sustain mass literacy in the indigenous languages. It is not uncommon for some parents to ask their school-going children to stay away from school so that they can help on the farms. As Slaughter (1985: 128) notes, 'minimally it must be economically possible to spare "hands" for the time it requires to obtain literacy whether in school or not'. Until recently a lot of parents in rural areas cited poverty as a reason for not sending their children to school because they had to pay fees and buy school uniforms. In an

attempt to improve the literacy levels, the government completely phased out school fees in primary schools and school uniforms are no longer compulsory. All this was done to encourage as many children as possible to go to school. The full impact of these changes is yet to be assessed. What is obvious at the moment is that the new system has added new strains on the government's budget.

Other attempts to increase literacy have been made through adult literacy programmes, known in Malawi as *Kwacha* schools. This activity, which was a basis for a study by Kishindo (1984), tried to link literacy with development education. Initially the programme had an agricultural bias given Malawi's dependence on agriculture. Later the focus was extended to include issues related to nutrition, health and family planning. Instruction was in the language of the area where the lessons took place. The primers were, however, in Chichewa. Apart from other reasons that hampered progress in this programme, it became apparent that a lot of people were not interested in the programme because it did not provide skills that would enable them to be gainfully employed. In short, they had little need for literacy outside a market economy.

There are also political factors that seem to go along with literacy. Some of these factors have already been explored above in connection with the status of language planning in Malawi. Language policies in multilingual communities are usually designed to reduce many complex aspects of societal multilingualism because such complexity is seen as inimical to the operation of a modern postindustrial state (Schiffman, 1996). Language policies are also sometimes designed to act as instruments of political integration where the standard becomes the unifying emblem of nation-statehood (Anderson, 1991; Silverstein, 1987), although it is a well known fact that there is nothing inherently unifying in a language. The case of Malawi is an example in which the national language took the identity of the political state. Standardisation of the official languages and promoting literacy in these standards are some of the ways in which the hegemony of this standard is entrenched in the collective psyche of the people.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper set out to examine recent attempts by the Malawi Government to implement a more comprehensive form of TBE in which indigenous languages will be introduced into the primary school system, breaking more than 30 years of Chichewa/English monopoly. The paper has examined both the prospects for success and the challenges that the new policy will have to contend with. It has been shown that, while Malawians accept that literacy empowers, they contend that it is only literacy in English that pays. The whole educational system is, in the words of McLaughlin (1992: 11), 'surrounded and supported by an ideology that subscribes to the idea that to get ahead people need to speak, read, and write English'. In a country where the language policy has essentially established the hegemony of English over indigenous languages, the fundamental question that this new policy must consider should revolve around the role that these languages can play in the

development of Malawi(ans) from a traditionally oral to an increasingly literate culture, ever more connected to the international community through the English language. It is prudent, therefore, that the debate over TBE and literacy in general should be put in its proper sociocultural context and seriously interrogate the feasibility and viability of using indigenous languages in education vis-à-vis the current Chichewa-English bilingual system. The wholesale introduction of indigenous languages into the school system may not work in Malawi if the attitudinal, political, economic and social problems outlined in this paper are not fully addressed.

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