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Attitudes towards English as a Medium of Instruction in Malawian Universities

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Abstract

Malawi's language-in-education policies have been through numerous changes since the colonial period. In 1996 a policy directive was announced which encouraged the use of the mother tongue in the early stages of education, before transitioning to English. However, this policy was never effectively implemented and, in 2014, an English-only policy was announced. This has resulted in renewed debate around which languages are suitable for use as mediums of instruction in the country. This article will discuss the Malawian language-in-education policy context, with a focus on university education and the prevailing attitudes which students and staff exhibit towards English. This will be done through an analysis of data collected through focus groups and interviews with students and staff in Malawian universities. The results show that, while English is viewed positively and as suitable for use within universities, it is not viewed uncritically and there are complex attitudes towards the language. English skills are viewed as a valuable resource; however, so too are multilingual language skills. Students and staff also display positive attitudes towards the use of a multilingual language policy in the university, suggesting that the recent policy changes in Malawi do not reflect stakeholder attitudes.

Keywords: language policy; language attitudes; higher education; Malawi; multilingualism; translanguaging

The Malawian education system has gone through several shifts in language-in-education policy, most notably affecting the primary years of education. While discrepancies do arise in data regarding the number of languages which exist in Malawi, there are approximately 17 languages in the country (Simons and Fennig 2018). Chichewa is the most widely spoken language in the country, while English is spoken by a minority of the population (Simons and Fennig 2018). Chichewa acts as the de facto national language and English is the de facto official language in the country. During colonial occupation, English was used as the medium of instruction (MOI) alongside Malawian languages (Mtenje 2013, 96).

Since independence, three major changes have taken place. Firstly, in 1969, Chichewa was

introduced as the MOI for the first four years of schooling, after which English was used as the MOI (Chilora 2000, 2; Mtenje 2013, 96). Then, in 1996, a policy directive was announced stating that children should be taught in their mother tongue for the first four years of education, after which, as before, English would be used as MOI (Secretary for Education 1996, cited in Kayambazinthu 1998, 412). Finally, in 2014, it was announced that the MOI would be English from the beginning of primary school and throughout the rest of a student's primary and secondary education. English has thus been positioned, at a legislative level, as the sole language which is suitable for use within education in Malawi.

Through analysis of focus groups and interviews conducted with students and staff, this article will discuss the prevailing attitudes towards English in Malawian universities. This will illustrate whether stakeholder perceptions at the university level match recent policy changes in viewing English-only instruction as the only suitable option for education. In presenting the complex attitudes towards English, it will be argued that Malawian universities are educational environments which have the potential to adopt multilingual language policies and language policies which embrace a translanguaging approach.

Research Context

Language policy is comprised of a number of distinct but interconnected factors, including language attitudes, language practices, and official legislation (Spolsky 2004, 5). Policies can be implicit, covert, and invisible, or they can be explicit, overt, and visible (Johnson 2013; Kachru 1991). Often there is a discrepancy between official legislative policy and language practices (Spolsky 2004) and it is widely acknowledged that awareness of a community's language attitudes is an essential factor in creating and implementing effective language policy legislation (Baker 1992; Kishindo 2008; Mtenje 2013). While acknowledging the multifaceted nature of language policy, the focus of this article is on analysing attitudes towards policy as official legislation.

The issue of language policies within Malawian universities cannot be viewed in isolation from external events. Dearden (2014) finds that there is growth in the use of English as MOI in higher education globally. There are favourable attitudes amongst students in several countries towards the use of English as MOI, often coinciding with negative attitudes towards using local languages (Al-Tamimi and Shuib 2009; Dyers 1997; Noboda 2010; Sarfo 2012; Yu 2010). Studies within African universities have generally found positive attitudes towards

European languages such as English and corresponding negative attitudes towards African languages. This is primarily influenced by the perception that English is of higher instrumental value to individuals, as a language which can increase social mobility and employment opportunities (Ajepe 2014 [Nigeria]; Dalvit and De Klerk 2005 [South Africa]; Irakoze 2015 [Burundi]; Melliti 2008 [Tunisia]; Mohr and Ochieng 2017 [Tanzania]). Where African languages are viewed positively, this is primarily because of the integrative value associated with these languages as important markers of identity (Dyers and Abongdia 2014; Kamwangamalu and Tovares 2016; Noboda 2010). Research in South Africa has, however, found that there are positive attitudes towards the introduction of African languages in higher education and towards the use of a multilingual MOI (Aziakpono and Bekker 2010; Ditsele 2016; Lombard 2017; Nkosi 2014; Wildsmith-Cromarty and Conduah 2014).

International advice has consistently stressed the importance of mother tongue-based education in the early years of schooling (UNESCO 1953; UNESCO 2003; UNESCO 2008). In much of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), however, this is then followed by a transition, in policy if not always practice, to English-medium instruction for the remainder of education (Simpson 2017). Indeed, as Ekkehard Wolff (2016, 38) notes, “most if not all African countries aim for higher education to be run through a foreign language”. This results in a situation in many countries in which, at a policy level, colonial European languages are recognised as suitable languages for use as MOI in higher education, with a notable absence of African languages (Brock-Utne 2003; Koch and Burkett 2006). There are notable exceptions to this. For example, the Department of Kiswahili at the University of Dar es Salam in Tanzania uses Kiswahili as MOI (Brock-Utne 2003) and the Adekunle Ajasin University in Nigeria teaches language and literature courses in Yoruba (Awobuluyi 2013). In South Africa, national legislation (DHET 2018) as well as individual university policies (e.g. Rhodes University 2014; Unisa 2016) promote the use of African languages and multilingualism in universities. However, in these contexts there is often a discrepancy between policy and practice and the multilingualism promoted does not manifest (Drummond 2016; Koch and Burkett 2006; Mkhize and Balfour 2017; Moodley 2010; Van der Merwe 2016). Against this backdrop of the high use of non-African languages within university education, there are calls for the introduction of African languages and the promotion of multilingualism at university level in Africa, with adequate resources provided to support implementation (Balfour 2007; Brock-Utne 2003; Dyers 2013; Ekkehard Wolff 2016; Oduor 2015).

Related to these increasing calls to promote the inclusion of African languages within higher education, there is also a need to reflect on the ways in which language policies themselves are conceptualised. Legislative policy is often based on a Eurocentric, essentialist view of languages existing as discrete, bounded entities (Erling, Adinolfi, and Hultgren 2017, 142), which is not necessarily appropriate to multilingual communities. A translanguaging perspective challenges the boundaries between named languages and views speakers as possessing an integrated linguistic repertoire and a range of linguistic resources, from which they can fluidly draw to effectively communicate (Wei 2011; Wei 2017). Translanguaging practices are found in universities worldwide (Mazak and Carroll 2016). Integrating translanguaging concepts into language planning and language policies could have a positive impact on education in Africa, as it would more accurately reflect the linguistic practices of individuals in the education system, encourage a positive attitude towards multilingualism, and challenge the dominance of former colonial languages in Africa (Bagwasi 2017; Early and Norton 2014; Makalela 2016a; Makalela 2016b; Makoe and McKinney 2014).

Language policies in Malawi have been widely criticised (Kamwendo 2004; Matiki 2001; Matiki 2003; Moyo 2001), partly due to the lack of research or planning to support their implementation. The most recent policy change has caused renewed debate in Malawi over which languages are suitable for use in education, as public attitudes towards the policy differ (Chiwanda 2014; Gwengwe 2014). When attempting to understand the rationale behind this newest iteration of the Malawian language-in-education policy, the way in which English is referred to in education textbooks and syllabuses is illuminating. One of the core aims of the education system in Malawi is to enable students to “communicate competently, effectively, and relevantly in a variety of contexts, in an appropriate local or international language” (Malawi Institute of Education 2013, viii). The recent and renewed focus on the English language appears to highlight a tendency to focus on the importance of the “international language”.

This dichotomy between the “local” and “international” can be seen in another of the core aims: that students “apply the indigenous and non-indigenous knowledge and skills necessary for lifelong learning, personal advancement, employment, and the development of society” (Malawi Institute of Education 2013, viii). There is a clearly marked difference between indigenous local knowledge (knowledge associated with the local context and local

language/s) and non-indigenous knowledge (the international knowledge which becomes associated with the global community and a global language—English). Regarding the local, there is a strong sense of the desire to instil in students a pride in being Malawian, an understanding and appreciation of symbols of Malawian nationhood, patriotism and the desire for unity amongst all Malawians, and an appreciation and respect for Malawi's various cultures (Malawi Institute of Education 2013, viii). While these points may, on the one hand, seem to bolster the argument for utilising Malawian languages within education, they are instead used to justify the desire for English. English is seen to “promote unity and facilitate communication in Malawi's multicultural society” and English is encouraged, as “proficiency in English is essential for employment opportunities” (Malawi Institute of Education 2013, xi). For many in Malawi, English is synonymous with education (Kamwendo 2003; Matiki 2001) and the recent English-only policy is indicative of the prestige which is afforded to the language in the Malawian education system.

Data

This research was conducted in seven public universities and one private university, across all three regions in Malawi, in late 2016. The data presented below consists of 90 interviews (25 staff members and 65 students) and eight focus groups. Participants were recruited across a range of universities, year groups, and subject areas, and the “friend-of-a-friend” (Schilling 2013) method was adopted to gain access to participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, as they provide direct access to individuals who are “the best sources of the desired information” (Dressler and Oths 2015, 506; see also Edley and Litosseliti 2010). This then allows for a better understanding of the experiences of the participants and the effects these experiences have on their attitudes and behaviour (Silverman 2009; Weller 2015). Student focus groups were also conducted, as the “spontaneity of interaction among participants” (Freitas et al. 1998, 4) in the focus group is “a valuable way of gaining insight into shared understandings and beliefs” (King 2004, 256) and gives participants the opportunity to “hear the views and experiences of their peers and cause them to reflect back on their own experiences and thoughts” (King 2004, 256).

Data was collected by the author and, while the interviews and focus groups were predominately in English, Chichewa was also used during data collection. The interviews and focus groups provide the basis for the following discussion concerning attitudes towards language policies, with a specific focus on English. The data collected was recorded on two

Dictaphones (one main and one back-up), transcribed, and qualitatively coded to identify key themes emerging from participants' responses regarding language. Additionally, some data lends itself to quantification, such as participants' responses to language attitude statements, which will now be discussed.

Results

During the interviews, participants were asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the responses to the direct language attitude statements for both students and staff. Generally, most participants agree that English is a suitable language to use at university in Malawi. When considering the suitability of Chichewa, a minority of participants agree that it is a suitable language to use at university. However, the majority agree that the use of English and Chichewa is suitable at university. These responses suggest that, while a monolingual English policy is viewed as the most suitable for use within the university, there is support for a policy which adopts both English and Chichewa.

Table 1: Student responses to language attitude statements

Statement	Agree	Disagree
English is a suitable language to use at university in Malawi	92%	8%
Chichewa is a suitable language to use at university in Malawi	36%	64%
Using English and Chichewa would be suitable at university in Malawi	69%	31%

Table 2: Staff responses to language attitude statements

Statement	Agree	Disagree
English is a suitable language to use at university in Malawi	100%	0%

Chichewa is a suitable language to use at university in Malawi	30.1%	69.9%
Using English and Chichewa would be suitable at university in Malawi	65%	35%

Table 3: Focus group responses

Rankings	Number of focus groups
1. English & Chichewa 2. English 3. Chichewa	Seven (87.5%)
1. English 2. English & Chichewa 3. Chichewa	One (12.5%)

Each focus group was presented with three policy options and asked to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each, and then to rank them in terms of favourability. The results can be seen in Table 3. Seven of eight focus groups thought that a policy which combines both English and Chichewa would be best, followed by English only, and then a Chichewa-only policy.

Taken together, these figures show that there is support for a language policy in Malawian universities which makes use of both English and Chichewa. This provides initial insight into language attitudes, which can be explored in more detail through looking at the qualitative data produced in the interviews and focus groups. This will highlight the different attitudes and relationships which individuals in these institutions have towards the English language.

Language Rules

Initially, it becomes clear that there are complex sociolinguistics rules which dictate the suitability of using different languages in different contexts. Students indicate that there is a desire to be seen as someone who can speak English, because to not speak English, or to be perceived to be making mistakes in English, is embarrassing. This is due to the fact that “it’s a funny thing that you are at the university and English is still a problem” and “so people

laugh” (Interview #25). For some students, particularly within the classroom, the use of Chichewa is stigmatised and viewed as “abnormal” (Interview #41). In this way, English is privileged within the university.

However, it is also the case that speaking English is not appropriate in all circumstances and can lead to stigmatisation and accusations of being pompous. One student illustrates this, discussing the sociolinguistic rules which must be followed to integrate with others in the university: “Well, um, you’re trying to show off, yeah, cause here when you’re here everybody somehow they put a belief you just have to speak Chichewa, and if you speak English then you’re trying to be someone else, trying to show off, so in order just to fit in, just act like we’re all one, we just use one language” (Interview #56).

It is not simply the case that there are only positive connotations towards the use of English. The stigma which surrounds the inappropriate use of English or Chichewa creates unspoken rules around the suitability of languages in different contexts.

Multiple Linguistic Repertoires

An aspect which complicates the linguistic situation in universities in Malawi is the variety of linguistic repertoires with which students come to university. It was stated in one of the focus groups that the more prestigious high schools generally would not offer Chichewa as a subject, as they follow an English curriculum, and would discourage the use of Chichewa on school grounds, fining students who speak it. This results in a situation in which “nowadays children can grow up even without speaking Chichewa” (Speaker #5, Focus Group #2). However, less prestigious, poorly funded schools are perceived to produce students who are not equipped with a high level of English, as “some here come from some community schools, they can’t even speak English” (Speaker #2, Focus Group #8) and “we have some poor, poor, poor districts here in Malawi where they can’t even afford to speak English” (Speaker #2, Focus Group #8). This shows that different students are comfortable with English to a greater or lesser extent. This then influences their ability, and desire, to use English in various contexts, and their attitudes towards the language.

English as Foreign

The varying repertoires students possess are also related to how they view their relationship with the English language. Some view it as something which is foreign to them, and they

would fail “even to ask questions because they are afraid of speaking English” (Speaker #3, Focus Group #1). This is due to the fact that as “Malawians we are not born speaking English, we are born speaking Chichewa or other languages and we just learn English” (Speaker #6, Focus Group #2). For these students, English is something which must be learned at school, not something which is part of their home life. This causes a disconnect, and they are not necessarily proud of their ability to speak English: “When I go home I can’t speak to my mother in English; I mean, she wouldn’t understand ’cause she hasn’t gone to school. Why should I be proud of the language in which I wouldn’t speak to my own mother?” (Interview #21).

However, for others, English is not seen as something which is foreign, but something which is of the home. As one student states: “I’m used to speaking English. I think in English; I don’t think in Chichewa” (Interview #17). It is more an integral part of their lives. Depending on their backgrounds, it can be an active part of their everyday lives at home, with friends, and at school. It is viewed pragmatically as a language which has benefits and which can be used to communicate with a wide range of people; it is a “language which has been given to Malawi as a second language and a language for communicating” (Interview #28).

English and Identity

Related to whether English is viewed as foreign to students are ideas surrounding language and identity and how the presence of English in their lives influences their identity. Some view it as having a detrimental impact on their heritage. They view the use of English as something which is making them less Malawian. They combat this by “speaking Chichewa more” to “sound more Malawian” (Speaker #3, Focus Group #5). Due to some students’ exposure to English they feel like they’re “getting that English mental thing” (Interview #97). One lecturer stated that they now use English more than any Malawian language and feel that they have lost aspects of these languages, and as a result of “losing a language ... you lose your identity” (Interview #46).

Others, however, view their use of English and the place of English in their lives as just one aspect of their identity. English is not something which is destructive, taking away a part of their identity, but rather something constructive. Their identities are fluid and changing and English is part of that. Some students embrace the opportunity which university affords them to develop their English skills, to develop ‘that English mental’ thing because it makes them

stand out. English is a language of prestige, and students enjoy the prestige that it brings. It is important for them to be seen to be English speakers in their communities, as then people will know that they are educated university students: “A difference between you and someone who you know maybe dropped out of school at Standard 2, they’ll say ‘Look at that one: when she was at secondary school she never used to speak English, but then when she went to university; she speaks English’” (Speaker #3, Focus Group #3).

The university environment is one in which English is supposed to be the dominant language. Students want to use English because of the prestige value associated with it and with the university. Being at university, they are expected to be English speakers, which sets them apart from their peers who do not attend university. Students are developing, and using more English is part of their growth and a part which makes that growth evident to others.

English and Society

Students show a critical awareness of societal attitudes towards languages. They believe English is a language which they need in order to be successful, but they are not born thinking this as a universal truth. They know that they’re “taught, subconsciously taught that Chichewa isn’t really that great” through the exposure to certain language ideologies present in the education system which makes them “sort of look down on the language, make it seem like it’s associated with not being educated” (Speaker #5, Focus Group #5).

English as (One) Resource

Students recognise the value of knowing English and that “the students of Malawi must [embrace] English” as it “is a good language” (Interview #14) which is “a must ... whether you like it or not” (Interview #35). It is a language “that everyone has to know for the communicating purposes so that we should understand each other ... outside the country or within the country” (Interview #1). Staff reiterate this, stating that their students will “have to go outside” and so “they need a language which is international” (Interview #80). They need this for employment purposes, but also if they wish to pursue postgraduate education.

Students also show an awareness that English is not the only language that they need to live their lives. This is because of what different languages allow them to do and because of the space they inhabit. English lets them speak outwards to the global community, but Chichewa lets them speak to Malawians: “Because you can’t say that you are from Malawi but yet you

don't speak Chichewa, so we need both English and Chichewa so that we should be known that this person belongs to Malawi, but he is also an educated person who can speak English anywhere else wherever he goes" (Speaker #4, Focus Group #2).

Depending on the type of job a student will have, they may be required to interact with Malawians who do not speak English. It is then suggested that using Chichewa at university to learn aspects of their subjects would be beneficial. This is exemplified by nursing students, who state: "We are like a bridge" between "the government and the rural people" (Speaker #4, Focus Group #3) and who need both English and Chichewa in order to fulfil this role. Students occupy a space where both languages have value.

Conclusion

While individuals acknowledge the benefits of English, the language is not viewed uncritically as an MOI in Malawian universities. This is made clear in one response in which a student states: "So of course an English all-an-all English policy is good, there is no doubt about that, it is very good. The only downside to it would be, say, the fact that a lot of students wouldn't really understand what is going to be taught in class or in lectures; that would be the main downside" (Speaker #3, Focus Group #2).

English is viewed positively, and students and staff view it as a suitable language to use at university. However, it has also been shown that a majority of students and staff are in favour of using both English and Chichewa. This suggests that key stakeholders in Malawian universities are open towards the inclusion of a multilingual language policy which involves an African language. The value of linguistic diversity and multilingualism, recognised by students and staff, can be reinforced by multilingual language policies and the use of translanguaging in academic environments (Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Seirra 2013; Tikly 2016).

Students and staff, however, represent only one group of stakeholders, with varying degrees of power determining how they can choose to use language at university (see Johnson and Johnson 2014). While there are positive attitudes towards a policy which uses both English and Chichewa, the ability of individuals to freely adopt translanguaging in Malawian universities, without stigmatisation, is constrained by an education system which promotes an English-only approach as the most viable option. The attitudes presented do suggest that there

is potential for an alternative approach to language-in-education policy in Malawi which moves away from a monolingual English-only policy.

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