

“THINGS THAT ARE SPOKEN BY OTHER PEOPLE”: CLASSROOMS AS ZONES OF MYSTIFICATION

Eddie Williams¹
University of Reading

1. Introduction²

In most of sub-Saharan Africa, ex-colonial languages occupy a major educational role as media of instruction. Two political reasons put forward to justify this are national unification and modernisation. Considerable evidence now suggests, however, that the policies of using these languages as media of instruction have been counterproductive, as far as academic achievement for the vast majority of children is concerned. By virtue of the educational failure, such policies have also failed to contribute towards national unification and modernisation. The evidence in this paper concerns English in Malawi and Zambia, but the state of affairs described in them, obtains in many other sub-Saharan countries.

The negative educational effects of English as a medium of instruction in Africa have been empirically documented for some time: Criper and Dodd (1984, cited in Yahya-Othman, 1989: 49), for example, report that of 2,419 pupils tested in Tanzania “at all levels of the educational system, only 29% had attained a level for easily following studies at their respective levels”. In Zambia, Chikalanga (1990: 69) reports the conclusion of another 1973 Zambian study of 583 pupils at year 5, namely that “there is a large group of very poor readers in most classes and they are unlikely to be able to cope with the English course ... nor be able to do much of the work in other subjects”. A Zambian review found in 1992 that “too early an emphasis on learning through English means that the majority of children form hazy and indistinct concepts in language, mathematics, science, and social studies. A number of studies show that children’s subsequent learning has been impaired by this policy” (Ministry of Education, 1992: 28). For Malawi, there seems to be no published empirical research in this field, although informal reports suggested there were similar difficulties. The work reported here is an attempt to assess the situation in the mid 1990s from the perspective of reading proficiency, related to pedagogic practice.

¹ CALS, University of Reading, PO Box 241, Reading, RG6 6WB; fax: +44 (0)1189756506; E.Williams@reading.ac.uk

² I am grateful to the UK Department of International Development for funding the research for this paper. Invaluable help in collecting local language data came from: Hannock Mateche, Rosemary Mkumba, Benson Zigona (Malawi); Israel Chikalanga, Bridget Chipimo, Catherine Nakaanga, Martin Phiri (Zambia).

2. Country background

Malawi and Zambia are both in southern Africa, with a common border, and shared historical backgrounds, gaining independence from Britain in the 1960's. Both countries are predominantly rural, and economically very weak. Zambia has “slightly over 20 more or less mutually unintelligible clusters or ‘languages’” (Kashoki, 1990: 109). Seven languages are officially designated as subjects to be studied in schools. The proportion of speakers of these (L1 and L2) is estimated (Kashoki, 1990: 117) to be³:

Table 1: Distribution of Seven Zambian Languages

	Bemba	Kaonde	Lozi	Lunda	Luvale	Nyanja	Tonga
L1:	30.8%	3.4%	9.3%	2.9%	5.9%	16.0%	16.1%
L1+L2:	56.2%	7.1%	17.2%	5.3%	8.1%	42.1%	23.2%

Estimates of the number of indigenous language varieties in Malawi vary. Sichinga (1994) estimates the distribution of the three principal languages as follows:

Table 2: Distribution of Three Malawian Languages

	ChiChewa	Chiyao	Chitumbuka	Others
L1:	27%	19%	11%	43%
L1+2:	80%	20%	15%	not available

ChiChewa and Nyanja are different labels –which came about for historical and political reasons– for what is essentially the “same” language (Kishindo, 1990: 59), with minor variations in spelling and lexis.

Primary education in Zambia is free and consists of a 7 year programme available to all children between the ages of 7 and 14. English is, officially the language of instruction in primary education from year 1 for all subjects apart from spiritual instruction and one of the 7 local languages. In Malawi, there are 8 years of primary schooling, with children officially starting at age 6. The language of instruction for the first 4 years is ChiChewa, with English as a subject⁴; for the last 4 years English becomes the language of instruction, and ChiChewa a subject. The material conditions in schools in both countries (with exception of the relatively élite urban central schools) are generally inadequate: classes are large (frequently over 100 in

³ This paper follows Zambian English practice of omitting language prefixes (Chi-, Ici-, Si-, etc.) when discussing Zambia, and Malawian English practice of including them when discussing Malawi.

⁴ Time allocation for English was 5 x 30 minutes in years 1 and 2, and 7 x 30 minutes in years 3 and 4.

Malawi); many classes take place outside due to room shortages; classrooms have few or no desks; there are severe book shortages; there is no electricity or running water.

3. Data Sources

The quantitative data for this paper are the results of reading tests in English and local languages; qualitative data are from discussion and reading investigation sessions with selected testees, carried out in the local languages. For all three languages (English, ChiChewa, Nyanja) modified cloze tests were used, with 4 or 6 deletions per paragraph, and the appropriate words (plus two additional “dummies”) supplied in a box above each paragraph⁵. All three versions had a total of 30 deletions. Both local language tests were taken from the same Zambian school text with the Malawian version very slightly modified, having two different lexical items, and four differently spelled words. For the English reading investigation sessions a 119 word passage was concocted using language from year 4⁶, and for local language reading investigation, a 71 word unmodified passage from the year 5 Zambian coursebook was used for both Malawi and Zambia.

In each country test data were collected from year 5 pupils in 4 rural schools and 2 urban schools. Year 5 is when Malawi switches to English medium, and where one might therefore expect any inter-country differences to be maximised. A total of 290 pupils were tested in Malawi, and 227 in Zambia. All the children claimed to be able to speak ChiChewa and Nyanja respectively⁷, and the investigations were carried out in areas where these were the predominant local languages. Data for the discussion and reading investigation sessions⁸ comes from 24 pupils in each country, 12 high scoring, and 12 low scoring, with girls and boys selected from each of the 6 schools. High and low scoring groups (based on English test results) were established relatively, not absolutely, for each school. The high scorers' range was 13-30 in Malawi, and 19-30 in Zambia, with the low scorers' range 3-9, and 0-8 respectively.

⁵ This format was selected from others after piloting, as by far the most pupil-friendly, and corresponding to exercises done in class.

⁶ It included 5 non-crucial lexical items judged to be difficult.

⁷ 18% of the Malawian testees spoke a language other than ChiChewa at home, and 46% of the Zambians a language other than Nyanja. Test results showed a very small statistically insignificant difference in favour of those who spoke the test language at home.

⁸ In order to help put pupils at their ease in the structured discussion and reading investigation sessions (held as single session of 15 to 30 minutes), individuals chose 2 friends to accompany them.

4.1. Findings for English: Test results

The cloze tests each had a maximum score of 30 points; descriptive statistics⁹ of the results are as follows:

Table 3: Results of English Reading Test for Malawi and Zambia

	N	Mean	SD	Max	Median	Min
Malawi	290	12.84	6.22	30	12	1
Zambia	227	11.72	9.48	30	8	0

The means are very slightly in favour of Malawi, but not at a statistically significant level, and this suggests that there is no overall difference in reading ability in English between children in Zambia and children in Malawi. It seems that Zambian children who have officially had the first four years of education through the medium of English are not superior to Malawian children who have officially had ChiChewa as a medium of instruction for those years.

4.2. Findings for English: Reading Investigation Sessions

During the discussions with the Zambian testees that preceded the reading, 8 out of 12 high scorers in Zambia reported they generally had difficulties in reading English; 4 reported no difficulty (2 of whom scored the maximum of 30). When asked to read the English text, 8 of the Zambian low scorers could read neither English nor Nyanja texts, and were replaced (7 of the 8 scored in English at or below the chance score of 4; this melancholy figure at least provides a degree of concurrent validation for the test results).

In Malawi, 9 out of 12 high scorers reported that they generally found reading English difficult, and 10 out of 12 low scorers. For both sets of testees, the reading investigation confirmed that most had some difficulty, and some severe difficulty, with low scorers unable to understand words that had been pre-judged to be familiar, e.g. *sister*, *thirsty*, *everything*, *surprised*.

4.3. Implications for learning through the medium of English

For both countries the mean test score of approximately 12 out of 30 is not high, given that the test language was drawn from course books at year 4 and below. Both countries, however, prescribe English as the medium of instruction from year 5 onwards. It is extremely

⁹ Statistical analyses were performed by the Applied Statistics Department at Reading University, using the SAS package. Significance level is 0.05. The internal reliability of the tests (KR-21) varied from 0.75 to 0.95.

difficult to see how the majority of these pupils could be learning through reading in English - indeed it is almost certain that they are not doing so. To extrapolate from these test scores to estimates of comprehension in content areas is problematic (cf. Cummins and Swain, 1986: 18). However, a reasonably generous view is that a score of 10 or less out of 30 is likely to be below the threshold level for comprehension: 56.4 per cent of Zambians were in this position, and 41.4 per cent of Malawians. Further, given that the test texts were taken from *year 4 and below*, and administered to *year 5* pupils, then this conclusion certainly underestimates the percentage who cannot read with adequate comprehension at their level.

A more accurate estimate is probably provided from similar cloze tests reported in Williams (1993), where sub-tests specifically targetted year 6 in 5 schools in each country. In Malawi the proportion of year 6 pupils not considered capable of reading adequately in English (a score of 7 or less on a 20 item sub-test) was 78 per cent (N=158) and in Zambia 74 per cent (N=153). The latter proportion is remarkably close to the conclusion of the IIEP¹⁰ (1997, Ch. 6: 15) that the percentage of year 6 Zambian pupils failing to reach “the *minimum* level of mastery on the reading test” is about 74.2 per cent. These figures suggest that large numbers of pupils cannot adequately comprehend their English coursebooks, and certainly cannot understand their content subject course books.

5.1. Findings for local languages: Test results

The results of the local language modified cloze tests were:

Table 3: Results of Local Language Reading Tests for Malawi and Zambia

	N	Mean	SD	Max	Median	Min
Malawi	290	19.88	5.44	30	20.5	4
Zambia	227	4.4	3.70	22	3	0

The most striking feature is the superior performance of the Malawian children. In fact, the overall mean for Zambia is just above the chance level of 4. The results suggest that Malawian children read better in ChiChewa than Zambian children read in Nyanja. To obviate any suggestion that the Malawian version was easier, two Malawian schools also took the Zambian version of the test, achieving a mean of 18.66, very close to that which they achieved in the Malawian version.

¹⁰ The International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and the Zambian Ministry of Education conclusions result from a sample of 2558 pupils in 157 schools nation-wide.

5.2. Findings for Local Language: Reading Investigation Sessions

22 of the 24 Malawian pupils selected for the reading investigation sessions read aloud fluently with occasional deviancies which were judged to be performance slips (2 others opted to read silently). There was little hesitation from those who read aloud, and all 24 pupils answered almost all questions acceptably. The researchers were accordingly confident that the text had been processed with understanding. In short, the individual sessions confirmed the test findings that most pupils appeared to be competent readers of ChiChewa (even the 12 judged as “low scoring” according to the English test results had a mean score of 18.42 on the ChiChewa test).

By contrast, the most striking feature of the Zambian pupils attempting the Nyanja passage was the very large proportion who said they were unable to read it, or who tried to read it and failed (on a text, furthermore, drawn from their own textbook). In the high scoring group 5 out of 12 pupils either could not, or did not want to, read the Nyanja text aloud, while the same was true of all 12 low scoring pupils. The following is typical of their responses:¹¹

- I: ... Now would you like to try reading the Nyanja passage?(...)
 P: Oh yes, let's try the Nyanja, because it is difficult for us. (sic)
 I: It is difficult for you? What about you Misheck? Is it difficult for you too?
 PF1: I don't know how to read Nyanja.
 I: So you don't know how to read? What about you Lufeyo?
 PF2: I can try a bit (...)
 I: OK, you start from here at the beginning
 P: Mfumu
- I: OK, Rodney help your friend.
 PF: Mfumu - Ma - ah, I can't.
 I: OK, Rodney can't manage. Maybe Lufeyo can try?
 PF: Mu- Mu- Mfumu ali napita pa- pa-
 I: I don't think Lufeyo can manage either, because some of what you've read is not there in this passage.

The general impression of the researchers concerning the 7 pupils who managed to read the Nyanja text is that 2 had only a very general idea of what the text was about, while 5 appeared to have a reasonable comprehension, although they had difficulties with some individual words. Again the reading sessions confirm the test results of very low competence in reading Nyanja.

6. Explaining the Unequal Gains

There is differential gain in these results, in terms of both the test scores, and the reading investigation findings: the Zambians do not seem to have benefitted from 4 years of

what is officially English medium education in terms of superior English results; the Malawians, on the other hand, do seem to have benefitted from 4 years of Chichewa medium in terms of clearly superior local language results.

The poor overall performance of Zambians in reading Nyanja is probably due to two reasons. First the variety of language used in the text, and second lack of exposure to written Nyanja. The variety of Nyanja in which Zambian children are competent is “town Nyanja” (see Kashoki, 1990: 137), a non-standard variety characterised by borrowings from English as well as other Zambian languages. The “standard Nyanja” of the Zambian language course books is a different variety, based on Malawian ChiChewa which is generally regarded as a “purer” form.¹² Zambian pupils are well aware of the differences between “town Nyanja” and “standard Nyanja”, with one pupil saying she didn’t like reading because “we are given different things, things that are spoken by other people, and not the Nyanja we speak”. The unfamiliar variety of their own language for reading seems to have given rise to vocabulary problems in particular, with one child saying the reading text was difficult: “Because we don’t know the words”. While this is a reminder of the caution needed in selecting local language varieties in education, it is also the case that if standard school Nyanja had been taught consistently from year one, then Zambian pupils would be more familiar with it by the time they reached year 5. Education of course, has historically, and in many countries, been an important institutional means of achieving language standardization.

Lack of exposure to written Nyanja, then, is the second reason for Zambian pupils’ low achievement in reading it. Not only are Zambian languages not used as media of instruction, they are also neglected as subjects in primary school teaching, since they “do not contribute in any way to the overall mark for secondary selection” (Ministry of Education, 1992: 45). This neglect is also borne out by pupil comments such as: “We sometimes do Nyanja, but it was a long time ago. We did it from time to time unless (sic) English, we learn English every day,” while another pupil claimed (speaking in Nyanja): “We don’t learn Nyanja. We used to do it in grade 4”.

The reason for Malawian pupils’ local language superiority is certainly that ChiChewa is used as the language of instruction for the first four years. Malawian pupils are thus accustomed to seeing ChiChewa in written form, and are also robust in their handling of slightly different varieties (see the results above of the two Malawian schools who did the Zambian cloze test).

¹¹ Italics indicate a translation from Chichewa/Nyanja. I=interviewer; P=pupil; PF=pupil’s friend.

However, if the reason for the Malawian pupils' superiority in the local language is said to be because they see it and read it more often, then why are the Zambian pupils not superior in English, as they see and hear English more often? The answer to this is probably to be found in the dominant pedagogic practices in both countries. Nearly all teachers rely on the "look and say" (whole word and whole sentence approach) with little attention to the presentation or checking of meaning. The following transcript extract of a year 3 Zambian class is typical:

Teacher: We are going to read the story [...] which has been written on the board. Who can read the first sentence in paragraph three? Yes?

Pupil 1: Look at that hippo's mouth father.

Teacher: Read aloud.

Pupil 1: Look at that hippo's mouth father

Teacher: Once more.

Pupil 1: Look at that hippo's mouth father.

Teacher: Yes, the sentence is 'Look at that hippo's mouth father'.

Class: Look at that hippo's mouth father.

Teacher: Look at that hippo's mouth father

Class: Look at that hippo's mouth father.

Teacher: Yes. (Points) Who can read that sentence? Who can read the next sentence?

The majority of the class are here repeating what the teacher (or a pupil known to be competent) are modelling. The result is a "reading-like activity" which has the superficial characteristics of "real" reading aloud, but which masks the lack of real competence, if reading is defined as perceiving and *understanding* written language. While acknowledging, with Segalowitz et al. (1991) that consistent repetition may improve the speed of automatic recognition of written words, the crucial issue is "how consistently and frequently a given *meaning* representation is associated with its graphemic representation" (Segalowitz et al., 1991: 22; my italics). Repetition without understanding is of very limited value, and therefore Zambian pupils are no better at English reading than their Malawian counterparts. The same procedures (repetition without attention to meaning) apply for reading Chichewa in Malawi, but the significant difference here is that the children can –as fluent speakers of Chichewa– understand what they are repeating. The negative effects of the English medium policy are thus compounded by an inappropriate pedagogy, based on "look and say", which was intended, in English-speaking countries such as the UK and USA, for *teaching initial reading* in English to those who already knew the language, but which, in Malawi and Zambia, is protracted beyond initial stages to serve as a method of *teaching reading comprehension* (it

¹² Thus many Zambian children are more familiar with the "town Nyanja" term *mabrikisi* (from the English "bricks", but with Nyanja *ma-* as a plural marker, and Nyanja phonology) rather than the standard *ncherwa*.

might in passing be noted that in Malawi the teaching of initial reading in Chichewa follows a syllabic “word attack” method).

7. Conclusion

The low levels of English reading proficiency revealed in this research suggest that the policy of using that language at primary level as a medium is highly questionable. One policy modification, especially for countries like Zambia, would be to reduce the role of English as a medium of instruction at primary level, in favour of the main local languages (recall that Malawian pupils’ superiority in local language reading, has not resulted in a lower performance in English; conversely, Zambia’s focus on English to the exclusion of the local languages has not paid off in terms of gains in English). Political imperatives would still require English as a subject, but such a policy modification might be socially acceptable and educationally beneficial.

Families in Malawi and Zambia support the English medium policies, in the hope of enhancing their children’s individual life chances, a support which coincides with the politicians’ choice of English to achieve national unity and modernisation. Nevertheless, the dominance of English in schools has not been an unqualified success for these political aims. As concerns unification, while English may have succeeded in preventing conflict between rival language groups, it has created division between those groups who have reasonable access to English, typically members of the relatively well-off urban classes, and those groups who do not, typically the members of poor rural classes. That the use of English is indeed the divisive factor, and not simply inequity in rural and urban education provision, is suggested by very large mean differences¹³ in Malawi for English scores between the rural and urban children (11.42 and 15.29 respectively), but very small differences for the same groups for ChiChewa scores (19.43 and 20.65 respectively).

As far as modernisation of the nation is concerned, one assumes this will be dependent upon a significant proportion of educated citizens. Here the use of English in primary schools is a double-edged sword: it is indeed educating a minority of individual pupils, but the majority who fail to acquire adequate competence continue their English-medium education in a miasma of incomprehension, and without comprehension there can be little development of academic skills. There is thus a danger that school is a stultifying, rather than an enlightening, experience,

¹³ These rural / urban English differences in Malawi however, just fail to attain statistical significance, due to the small number of schools (not pupils) in the study. If the results of Malawi and Zambia are pooled, however, then there is a significant urban / rural difference.

supported by the case of the 8 Zambian pupils who could not read in any language. It is difficult to see what benefit pupils like these are gaining from sitting day after day, year upon year, chanting aloud and copying down what they cannot understand (informal investigations suggest many non-readers copy accurately from the blackboard, but cannot read one word of their own writing). The Malawi results clearly support the commonsense point that literacy in a known local language is relatively easier to achieve, especially under the difficult circumstances currently prevailing. To the objection that, even if Zambians learned to read Nyanja, there are few Nyanja books for to read and learn from, one can only respond that until more people become literate in it, this will continue to be the case. Moreover, these test results suggest there is little learning going on in English either.

Solutions to language-in-education issues in most sub-Saharan countries are, because of social and economic tensions, are likely to be partial and slow, and it does not behove outsiders to be too glib in their views. Poor pupil achievement cannot be attributed entirely to the language policy: inefficient pedagogy, low teacher morale, frequent pupil and teacher absence, and inadequate material conditions also play their part, and may be traced back to national and personal economic poverty. However, the multiple problems in the situation are actually compounded, not alleviated, by the language education policies. The irony is that whereas rich countries might be able to afford a policy of a universal home-school language switch, it is precisely the poor countries who cannot afford such a policy who attempt to implement it. On the other hand, using the mother tongues of every language group in Zambia is not a practical proposition: there may nonetheless be merit in producing materials in the major local languages, which as members of the Eastern Bantu language continuum, are more accessible to pupils than is English (Kashoki, 1978). Whatever measures may be taken towards more constructive language policies, an essential preliminary step is that policy makers acknowledge the testimony of their own children on the negative effects of current language policies.

References

- Chikalanga, I.W. (1990), *Inferencing in the reading process*, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Reading.
- Cummins, J., M. Swain (1986), *Bilingualism in education*, London, Longman.
- International Institute for Educational Planning and Zambian Ministry of Education (1997), *The Analysis of Education Research Data for Policy Development: the Zambian Case*, Paris, International Institute for Educational Planning (mimeo report).
- Kashoki, M.E. (1990), *The factor of language in Zambia*, Lusaka, Kenneth Kaunda Foundation.

- Kishindo, P.J. (1990), "An historical survey of spontaneous and planned development of Chichewa", in I. Fodor, C. Hagege (eds.), *Language Reform: History and Future*, Vol. V, Hamburg, Helmut Buske Verlag, 59-82.
- Ministry of Education [Zambia] (1992), *Focus on learning*, Lusaka, Ministry of Education.
- Segalowitz, N., C. Poulsen, M. Komoda, (1991), "Lower level components of reading skill in higher level bilinguals", in J.H. Hulstijn, J.F. Matter (eds.), *Reading in two languages: AILA Review 8*, Amsterdam, AILA, 15-30.
- Sichinga, W.K. (1994), *Language statistics in Malawi*, Zomba, Office of Statistics (mimeo).
- Williams, E. (1993), "First and second reading proficiency of year 3, 4 and 6 children in Malawi and Zambia", *Reading in a Foreign Language* 10(1), 915-29.
- Yahya-Othman, S. (1989), "When international languages clash: the possible detrimental effects on development of the conflict between English and Kiswahili in Tanzania", in C.M. Rubagumya (ed.), *Language in education in Africa*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 42-53.