

Language policy in Ghana and Malawi: differing approaches to multilingualism in education

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Abstract: Despite substantial international evidence that children learn best in a language which they understand, language-in-education policies in much of Africa do not effectively accommodate the range of languages found in the classroom, instead prescribing dominant national languages and/or colonial languages such as English. Further, these language policies continue to reflect a monoglossic conceptualisation of languages and do not adequately account for the multilingual repertoires of individuals and communities. They do not reflect an understanding of the ways in which multilingual language practices could be harnessed for education. This article provides a comparative overview of the policy context in Malawi and Ghana, at the levels of legislation, practice, and attitudes. Through interviews, questionnaires, classroom observations, and classroom recordings in primary schools, we highlight the multilingual realities of educational spaces in each country. We highlight that, despite different sociolinguistic and legislative contexts, there are similarities between these contexts which emerge as important factors when considering multilingualism within education.

Keywords: Language-in-education policy, multilingualism, Malawi, Ghana, language attitudes, classroom practices.

Note on the authors: see end of article.

1 Introduction and overview

Despite substantial international evidence that children learn best in a language which they understand (Dutcher 2004; Alidou *et al.* 2006; Ball 2011; UNESCO 2016; 2018), language-in-education policies in most African countries do not effectively accommodate the range of languages found in the classroom, instead prescribing dominant national languages and/or colonial languages such as English (Bamgbose 2004; Batibo 2014; Simpson 2017). Further, these language policies continue to reflect a monoglossic conceptualisation of languages and do not adequately account for the multilingual repertoires of individuals and communities (Erling *et al.* 2017; Reilly 2021). They do not reflect an understanding of the ways in which multilingual language practices could be harnessed for education.

This paper explores the ways in which multilingualism currently manifests, and is viewed, within primary education in two distinct African contexts—Malawi and Ghana. These contexts are compared to ascertain the degree to which issues within multilingual education in low resource contexts¹ are universal and to identify how varying contextual factors may influence the issues faced.

They vary socio-linguistically; in Malawi, English is treated as the *de facto* official language, while Chichewa is the *de facto* national language.² However, not every Malawian learner speaks or is familiar with Chichewa. There are approximately 18 languages spoken in Malawi: Chichewa, Cisená, Cilomwe, Ciyawo, Citonga, Cisenga, Cingoni, Citumbuka, Cilambya, Cinyika, Kyangonde, Cisukwa, Cindali, Cimambwe, Cibemba, Cinamwanga, Cnyakyusa, and Citumbuka-Citonga (CLS 2010: 40). This policy focus on English and Chichewa has resulted in a situation in which other Malawian languages, and speakers of those languages, are marginalised (Kishindo 1994; Kamwendo 2005). Ghana has 79 indigenous languages, of which nine are government-sponsored languages: Akan, Dagaare, Dangme, Dagbani, Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Kasem, and Nzema; and English as the official language (Dzahene-Quarshie & Moshi 2014; Yevudey 2017).

In terms of language-in-education policy, the two countries are also distinct. In contrast to other countries in the region, Malawi's 2013 policy states that English should be the only language used in education (Law Commission 2013). In Ghana, the government-sponsored languages in addition to English are used as media of instruction at the lower grade classes 1–3, and from grade 4 onwards the government-sponsored languages become subjects of study and English becomes the medium of instruction

¹ Following Erling *et al.* (2021: 2) we define low resource contexts as those in which “as capacity constraints around resources—for individuals, schools and communities—inhibit the quality and equity of learning and teaching.”

² In this context, the official language acts as the language of government and other high-level domains while the national language has cultural relevance as a language of national unity.

from grade 4 to tertiary level (Ansah 2014; Ministry of Education, Ghana & Ghana Education Service 2014; 2020; Bretou 2021; Djorbua *et al.* 2021).

While these differences exist, alongside additional distinctions in terms of e.g. economy, society, culture, and population, we present a comparison of these contexts as two countries which have undergone numerous language policy changes in the last 70 years. Our interest is in using these two case studies to explore the various pressures which influence language policy formation, how these pressures may have different policy outcomes, and the extent to which language policies are practically implemented in multilingual contexts.

This paper provides a comparative overview of the policy context in each country, at the levels of legislation, practice, and attitudes. Through interviews, classroom observations, classroom recordings, and questionnaires in primary schools, we highlight the multilingual realities of educational spaces in each country, and how the multilingual practices in the classroom are viewed by pupils and teachers. We will highlight that, despite different sociolinguistic and legislative contexts, there are similarities between these contexts which emerge as important factors when considering multilingualism within education.

Section 2 provides an overview of key issues regarding monolingual versus multilingual approaches to education in multilingual contexts. Section 3 provides a comparison of the language policy approaches in Ghana and Malawi. Then, in Section 4 and Section 5, respectively, data from each country is discussed and compared, highlighting the language practices and language attitudes in each context. Finally, Section 6 provides a discussion of the key findings of this comparison.

In comparing these two different contexts, this paper will address the following questions:

- 1 What multilingual practices are found in primary classrooms in Malawi and Ghana?
- 2 What are the perceptions towards multilingual practices in primary classrooms in Malawi and Ghana?

2 Overview of multilingual education

Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) provides students with the opportunity to learn in a language with which they are familiar and can provide them with a solid foundation in literacy skills before acquiring literacy in second/foreign languages such as English (Heugh 2002; Nekatibeb 2007; Ball 2011; Kirkpatrick 2013; Global Education Monitoring Report 2014; Taylor & Fintel 2016). Current research suggests that for MTB MLE to be effective, the period in which the familiar language is used should be as long as possible before a transition to another language takes place. Heugh *et al.* (2007) suggest that this should be for at least six to

eight years in sufficiently resourced, effective learning environments. However, in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), early exit transitions are commonplace, with the medium of instruction (MOI) moving away from a familiar language to a less familiar language such as English after the lower primary stage (Simpson 2017). The minimal time spent using a familiar language is not sufficient for learners to be able to develop the language and literacy skills that are required to effectively learn in the new MOI (ibid.).

Current policy and practice in much of SSA do not effectively incorporate learners' (and teachers') multilingual resources into education, and go against research evidence of the benefits of MTB MLE (Agbozo & ResCue 2020; Opoku-Amankwa & Brew-Hammond 2011). This is largely due to perceived disadvantages or challenges of adopting a multilingual approach. Two of the major challenges are that 1) it is considered to be economically difficult to incorporate multiple languages into the classroom (Schmied 1991; Breton 2003) and 2) colonial, European languages such as English are viewed as more suitable for educational purposes and inherently more valuable for learners to know for life opportunities (Heugh *et al.* 2007; Tembe & Norton 2008; Becker 2014; Bamgbose 2014). While there is increasing evidence of the benefits of mother tongue and multilingual education (Cummins 2000; Ball 2011; Yevudey 2013), there is concurrently an increase in the use of English as a medium of instruction across various levels of education globally (Dearden 2014). The difficulties of promoting mother tongue education within SSA reflects the 'inequalities of multilingualism' (Tupas 2015) wherein promotion of mother tongue policies can conflict with regional/international socio-political structures which promote English.

Increasingly, calls are being made to recognise the benefits which multilingual teaching practices have within the classroom. This involves interchangeably using more than one language, drawing on a wide range of linguistic resources, within one lesson. This type of language use is widespread amongst multilinguals (Gardner-Chloros 2009; Lopez *et al.* 2017) and in multilingual classrooms, although often unofficial and stigmatised (Ferguson 2003; Heugh 2013; Mazak & Carroll 2016). Research shows that this has a wide range of pedagogical benefits such as: aiding student participation and performance (Clegg & Afitska 2011; Viriri & Viriri 2013); content clarification (Ferguson 2003; Uyes 2010; Chimbganda & Mokgwathi 2012); classroom management (Canagarajah 1995; Ferguson 2003); humanising the classroom environment and expressing a shared identity amongst staff and students (Ferguson 2003); increased understanding of subject content (Baker 2001; Yevudey 2013); facilitating home-school links (Baker 2001); and reiterating important information (Adendorff 1993). While these practices are found to occur widely in multilingual contexts (Heugh 2013), they are often stigmatised and not recognised at an official policy level.

Research into multilingual teaching practices has been noted to be mostly descriptive and uncritical as it has largely attempted to highlight that multilingual language use is a legitimate strategy in the classroom (see Lin 2013 for criticism). Research has often

focused on high-resource contexts (Creese & Blackledge 2011; García & Li Wei 2014). It has been suggested that to harness multilingual language practices effectively, appropriate resources, curricula, pedagogies, and teacher training are necessary (Adendorff 1993; Vorster 2008; Erling *et al.* 2016; Erling *et al.* 2017). There are increasing advocates for language policies which adopt a flexible multilingual approach (Lasagabaster & García 2014; Guzula *et al.* 2016; Erling *et al.* 2017). However, further research is needed on how to effectively implement these policies and engage all stakeholders in supporting flexible multilingual policies (Weber 2014; Milligan *et al.* 2016; Erling *et al.* 2017). Accessible multilingual education is viewed as an essential step in achieving inclusive and quality education for all, as outlined in SDG4. As inclusive and quality education is viewed as a key foundation in achieving all 17 SDGs, multilingual education is key to achieving sustainable development (UN 2012; Vuzo 2018).

We consider multilingual education as a key element in enabling individuals and communities to live flourishing and fulfilled lives. This article seeks to contribute to the support for multilingual approaches to education in SSA, and beyond, and to foreground the importance of two factors when looking to progress discussions around language and education. These are 1) understanding how multilingual practices currently manifest in educational contexts; and 2) understanding the perceptions towards multilingualism of stakeholders. The following sections provide a comparative analysis of each of these three factors in the contexts of Malawi and Ghana.

3 Malawian and Ghanaian contexts

This section provides contextual information on the two countries as well as a historical overview of the language policies in Malawi and Ghana. In doing so, it will highlight the prevailing language ideologies which influence the policy decisions.

Both Malawi and Ghana are multilingual countries, albeit to varying degrees. The number of named languages reported in Malawi varies between 12 and 35 (Makoni & Mashiri 2006), all of which are Bantu languages. Chichewa is the most widely spoken language in the country, with the remaining languages being minorities to varying degrees. Ghana has approximately 79 indigenous languages (Simons & Fennig 2019, Ansah 2014). Ghanaian indigenous languages fall within the Niger-Kordofanian group. Widespread languages in the country include Akan, Ewe, Ghanaian Pidgin English, and Massina Fulfulde (Lewis *et al.* 2016).

After obtaining independence from Britain (Ghana in 1957 and Malawi in 1964), both countries adopted English as the *de facto* official language. In Malawi, Chichewa is also considered to be the *de facto* national language. *Ad hoc* announcements at various points since independence have also elevated a number

of additional Malawian languages to official languages ([Kayambazinthu 1998: 411](#); [Moyo 2001](#)). However, without any widespread publicity and little discernible practical change, the reality of English as the official language and Chichewa as the national language is the dominant perspective for the majority of citizens in the country. English is therefore the dominant language officially used in high-level domains such as government, business settings, and courts. It is also the dominant language within education, with Chichewa being the only Malawian language taught as a subject ([Chavula 2019](#)).

Ghana, by contrast, has at a government level provided more support to indigenous languages. Since 1951, out of the 79 indigenous languages, nine of them are government-sponsored languages. The nine languages are referred to as government-sponsored because they have been selected as languages that can be used and/or translated into in parliament, used during national events, and academic materials are frequently developed in these languages for use in schools. They are also approved languages of government that are to be taught and studied from pre-school to tertiary levels ([Owu-Ewie 2006; 2013](#)), and they are used as the major languages or one of the major languages of one of the then 10 regions of Ghana, where they tend to serve as lingua franca. Akan is spoken in Ashanti Region, Dagaare in Upper Western Region, Ewe in Volta Region, Dangme in Greater Accra, Dagbani in Northern Region, Ga in Greater Accra, Gonja in Northern Region, Kasem in Upper Eastern Region, and Nzema in Western Region (c.f. [Agbozo 2015; Yevudey & Agbozo 2019](#)). In the respective regions, these languages are also used as a medium of instruction from pre-school to lower grade classes 1–3 and as subjects of study from upper grade classes to tertiary levels where the latter refers to university, polytechnics, and Colleges of Education. It should be noted that Akan has three dialects, which are Asante Twi, Akwapim Twi, and Fante and they are spoken across various regions, including Western, Central, Ashanti, Eastern, Brong Ahafo, and the northern portion of the Volta region of Ghana.

3.1 Language-in-education policy

The tension between the competing roles of English and Malawian languages, and at what stages of education they should be used, has been central to the language-in-education policy debate in Malawi ([Kayambazinthu 1998: 389](#)). The changing language-in-education policies, which will be outlined below, suggest that this has remained true to the present day. Changes to Malawi's language-in-education policies have generally been implemented by newly elected governments and based on little sociolinguistic research. During the colonial period, colonial schooling used English as a MOI alongside indigenous languages in the early years of education

(Mtenje 2013: 96). During the colonial period, there was opposition to Chichewa being used as the sole Malawian language in education, with Levi Mumba, a leading Tumbuka educationalist, arguing that ‘people go to school to learn their own vernacular books, after which they wish to learn English which is more profitable’ (NNM1/16/4, Mombera District Council, 1931/39 cited in Kayambazinthu 1998: 400). Since Malawi achieved independence, there have been three major changes to the language-in-education policies: 1) In 1969, Chichewa was introduced as the MOI for the first four years of schooling, after which time English was to be used as the MOI for the remainder of education (Chilora 2000: 2; Mtenje 2013: 96). This was part of the then new government’s goal to ensure that Chichewa became a dominant language in the country. 2) In 1996, coinciding with the introduction of free primary education for all, a new policy directive was introduced stating that children should be taught in their mother tongue for the first four years of education, with English again being the MOI from the fifth year onwards (Secretary for Education 1996, cited in Kayambazinthu 1998: 412). This policy follows widely accepted international advice regarding the importance of early years’ mother tongue education in school (UNESCO 1953). However, this policy directive lacked a clear implementation plan and was never fully implemented (Kishindo 2015). 3) Finally, the most recent change in Malawi’s language-in-education policy occurred in 2014, after Malawi’s New Education Act was introduced and when it was announced that the MOI would be English from the beginning of primary school (Mchombo 2017: 195). The various changes to language-in-education policies in Malawi have all been introduced without being informed by any relevant research and without any existing implementation plans. This policy situation is important to understanding the contemporary sociolinguistic context as it provides a top-down perspective on which languages are deemed valid for use in the education system.

A similar tension between English and indigenous languages is present in Ghana. After Ghana’s independence in 1957, the policy of the country on language of education, especially for the lower primary/grade, has been characterised by a succession of multiple, sometimes conflicting, policies (Owu-Ewie 2006; Ansah 2014). As Leherr (2009: 2) states, ‘[d]espite being a multilingual country, Ghana has never had a nationwide approach for bilingual education, but rather a history of non-systematic instruction in English and local language and a changing and ambiguous language policy’. The policies either support monolingual MOI by promoting exclusive use of English, or bilingual MOI through a combination of the indigenous languages and English.

A closer consideration of the historical account of the language policies of both countries provides evidence of the fluctuations over the years. Table 1 presents a historical overview of the language policies from 1929 to 2002, which is adapted from Owu-Ewie (2006: 77) with the era beyond 2002 added. For purposes of comparison, Table 2 provides this information for Malawi.

From the historical evidence presented above, it could be argued that the current inconsistencies and conflicting policy on language-of-education in Ghana is a result of historical consequences as shown in Table 1. Taking into account the language of education between the 1529 and 1925 periods, Ghana had two education eras—the Castle School Era and the Missionary School Era. Both eras operated under different language policies. The castle schools were the schools set up by colonisers as the first formal education in the country aside the already existing informal education, which was mainly oral. The arrival of missionaries such as the Wesleyan and Basel Missionaries in the country, around the same period as the castle school, led to the establishment of mission schools. The MOI for the castle schools was English-only whereas the mission schools adopted a bilingual approach that stipulated using Ghanaian languages from the first to third year of studies with a transition to English from the fourth year onwards. These variations in policy are a consequence of the motivation of the two groups. Whereas the castle schools were meant to develop the local people into fluent speakers of the colonial languages, the missionaries, on the other hand, aimed to develop the language of the people while introducing them to the colonial languages. Studies such as [Agbozo and ResCue \(2020\)](#) and [Ansah \(2014\)](#) provide comprehensive historical insights into the various languages-of-education policies. These studies conclude that the historical evidence and the motivations for the previous policies on education have a great consequence for the formulation and implementation of future policies. The current policy stipulates the use of Ghanaian indigenous languages at the lower grade classes (grades 1–3) as mediums of instruction and English becomes the medium of instruction for grade 4 onwards. At the lower grade classes, English can be adopted in addition to the indigenous languages where necessary ([Ansah 2014](#); [Bretou 2021](#); [Djorbua et al. 2021](#)).

What emerges clearly in the two tables above is that the Ghanaian education has undergone more fluctuations to language-in-education policy than in Malawi. Both countries have involved indigenous languages to varying degrees in the early stages of education and so too have both had English-only policies, with Malawi's recent English-only approach contrasting distinctly with the Ghanaian policy approach. Another important factor in the policy context of each country is that these policy changes only directly affect the early primary years of education, and English is dominant in the remaining years of all stages in the education system. Thus, the major medium of instruction from upper primary/grade classes (grade 4) to tertiary level is English. So even when indigenous languages have been considered for use within education, they are only viewed as suitable within lower primary classes. The next section provides further discussion on the ideologies present within the contemporary policy context in each country.

Table 1. A diagrammatic representation of language-of-education policy in Ghana from pre-colonial era to the present.

PERIOD	1st YEAR	2nd YEAR	3rd YEAR	4th YEAR	5th YEAR
1529–1925:					
1 Castle Schools Era ³	English and other colonial languages				
2 Missionary School Era	Language of immediate community			English	
1925–1951	Language of immediate community			English	
1951–1955	Language of immediate community	English			
1956–1966	English				
1967–1969	Government-sponsored languages	English			
1970–1973	Government-sponsored languages				
1974–2002 (Sept.)	Government-sponsored languages			English	
2003–2006	English				
2003/4–2008/9(EQUALL) ⁴	Government-sponsored languages			English	
2009–Present	Government-sponsored languages + English, where necessary			English	

³ For further information on castle schools and a historical overview of the use of Ghanaian languages in education from 1529 see [Owu-Ewei \(2006\)](#).⁴ From 2003 to 2008, two language policies were in operation. First, the schools that use English-only medium of instruction and some selected schools called EQUALL schools were under the Education Quality for All (EQUALL) pilot study, a programme which was a bilingual medium of instruction.

Table 2. A diagrammatic representation of language of education policy in Malawi from pre-colonial era to the present.

PERIOD	1st YEAR	2nd YEAR	3rd YEAR	4th YEAR	5th YEAR +
1891–1964 (Colonial Period)	Malawian languages and English	Malawian languages and English			English
1964–1969	Malawian languages and English	Malawian languages and English			English
1969–1996	Chichewa				English
1996–2013 ⁵	Mother tongue/familiar language				English
2013–Present	English				

⁵ This policy directive was never fully implemented.

3.2 Language ideologies in policy

The language policies and language-in-education policies in Malawi have been widely criticised by Malawian academics. This is mainly due to the fact that the policies do not accurately reflect the multilingualism and linguistic resources which are found in the country. Due to this, [Moyo \(2001: 1\)](#) has stated that there 'is a crucial need for language policy in Malawi to be reviewed'.

[Simango \(2015\)](#) has suggested that despite the various changes to language-in-education policies, Malawi has yet to produce a policy which is effective and widely supported. The implementation of these policies has been characterised as ineffective and has lacked appropriate teacher training and resource development ([Moyo 2001](#); [Kamwendo 2003](#); [Mtenje 2013](#)). Effective language planning in low-income countries is difficult due to a lack of financial resources leading to ineffective implementation ([Breton 2003: 209](#)). The 1996 policy directive was never effectively implemented as resources were never produced in any language other than English and Chichewa, and teachers were placed in areas in which they could not speak the mother tongue of their learners ([Kishindo 2015](#)). This policy was also not widely supported by the public, who wanted their children to acquire English language skills and believed that a monolingual English MOI would be most beneficial for their children ([Msonthi 1997](#); [Matiki 2001](#); [Kamwendo 2008](#)). These reasons have contributed towards the new English-only policy, which [Kamwendo \(2015: 24\)](#) states is 'pedagogically unsound' and is not inclusive as it does not take into account the multilingual reality of Malawi. This new policy goes against research in Malawi which shows that development of literacy in Chichewa aids literacy development in English ([Shin et al. 2015](#)) and that a Chichewa MOI, instead of an English MOI, does not negatively impact reading ability in English but improves reading ability in Chichewa ([Williams 1996](#)).

The legislation which dictates the language-in-education policy in Malawi is the New Education Act. This act was introduced in 2013, to replace the 1962 Education Act, which was deemed to be obsolete and in need of reform ([Law Commission 2010](#)), and to work towards improving education provision in the country. The New Education Act seeks to ensure that education in Malawi will produce learners who have 'knowledge and skills relevant for social and economic development of the nation' by providing quality education which is inclusive and accessible ([Law Commission 2013: i](#)). Education in Malawi should provide a means to 'promote national unity, patriotism and ... loyalty to the nation' as well as 'an appreciation of one's culture' ([Law Commission 2013: 8–9](#)). At the same time, it should produce graduates who are able to 'compete successfully in the modern and ever-changing world' (*ibid.*). Curricula should be developed to ensure that they are relevant to Malawian students, Malawian society, and the 'dynamic global economy and society' ([Law Commission 2013: 41](#)). Education is then positioned as an experience which should benefit, and be

of relevance, to students in the local context but also to prepare them to participate in the global context.

The New Education Act states:

- (1) The medium of instruction in schools and colleges shall be English
- (2) Without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1), the Minister may, by notice published in the Gazette prescribe the language of instruction in schools

(Law Commission 2013: 42)

The announcement of the policy divided public opinion (Chiwanda 2014; Gwenge 2014) and has been widely criticised by Malawian linguists as being pedagogically unsuitable (Kamwendo 2015; 2016; Kishindo 2015; Miti 2015; Simango 2015). While the policy was to be introduced in 2014, it was designed without a clear plan for implementation, and at the time of writing, it is not clear to what extent it is being implemented in practice or how it has affected classroom language practices (Chavula 2019; Kamtukule 2019). The English-only policy implementation has been stated to be an ‘ongoing’ strategy (Government of the Republic of Malawi 2016: 48). It has also been acknowledged that adequate conditions and resources do not currently exist within the Malawian education system to enable effective implementation of an English-only policy (School-to-School International 2017; Kamwendo 2019; Dexis Consulting Group 2021).

A ‘coherent language policy’ (Kishindo, personal communication) does not exist in Malawi. Instead, as is the case with the ‘ambiguous language policy’ (Leherr 2009: 2) in Ghana, the ‘incoherent and contradictory language polic[ies]’ (Matiki 2001: 205) are viewed by many Malawian linguists as merely ‘statements made for political expediency’ (Kishindo, personal communication). For Kayambazinthu (1998: 369), language policies in Malawi have been created ‘ad hoc’ and represent an example of ‘reactive language planning’ which is ‘based more on self-interest and political whim than research’.

Malawi’s Constitution states that ‘[e]very person shall have the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of his or her choice’ (Government of Malawi 1998: 8). This constitutional right, however, appears to be limited as the legislative dominance of English in key domains such as politics,⁶ health, and education restricts the use of Malawian languages within them. Language planning in Malawi has numerous issues which result in a tension between policy and the linguistic reality of the country. The perception that English is the language which will most enable learners to contribute to their own development and the development of the nation, and to compete internationally, overrides any consideration of the benefits which multilingual approaches to education will have.

⁶ While English remains the official language of the political domain, politicians are aware of the value of Malawian languages, regularly using them during election campaigns.

There is a contrast in that the Ghanaian policy makes space for languages other than English. There is a similar lack of policy documentation in Ghana, as it is primarily teacher handbooks which provide information on MOI. As part of Ghana's commitment towards the provision of quality education, the government set up the Education Strategic Plan via the Ghana Ministry of Education. This was in congruence with research into language-of-education and the realisation of the benefits of bilingual education for both pedagogic purposes and the cognitive development of pupils. The strategic plan includes the following:

- 1) To ensure that by P3, pupils will be functionally literate and numerate and will have achieved reading fluency in their mother tongue (L1) and in English (L2); and,
- 2) To ensure literacy and numeracy in Ghanaian Language and English by 50 per cent of Primary 6 pupils by 2013.

(Leherr 2009: 1)

One of these strategies is the Breakthrough to Literacy/Bridge to English (BTL/BTE) programme, which was jointly funded and implemented by the Ghana Ministry of Education and the USAID-funded Education Quality for All (EQUALL) Project (Leherr 2009). The BTL/BTE project was meant to develop the literacy and numeracy skills of pupils in both Ghanaian languages and English. This language-of-education strategy is meant to develop pupils into 'balanced bilinguals' in their mother tongue and English. Inspired by the success of this project, the Ministry of Education in Ghana formed a National Literacy Task Force (NLTF) in June 2006 to develop and implement the National Literacy Acceleration Program (NALAP). This literacy programme came into effect in 2009 and was implemented mainly in public schools with support from USAID (Leherr 2009). The general aim of the NALAP is to provide quality education to pupils from kindergarten via the language they already know—that is, their mother tongue or language of wider communication of a given region/district—and their 'second language', English. The programme also aims to provide reading and teaching materials in selected Ghanaian indigenous languages and English to enable the pupils to acquire literacy and numeracy in both languages (Fobih *et al.* 2008). This bilingual programme is adopted in public government schools while private and international schools tend to adopt English-only instruction.

In all, the discussions present the linguistic and sociolinguistic realities that a given policy on language-of-education has to take into account and, in addition, the influence that these realities will have on the implementation and evaluation processes of the policy. It is evident that the multilingual nature of Ghana has had overarching consequences for language policy on education over the years. The Ghanaian policy offers some space for multilingualism, particularly within the early stages of schooling. However, this is still restricted to only the government-sponsored languages and English. English continues to dominate after the initial years of education, and the

switch to English instruction is too early to be pedagogically effective (Simpson 2017; Boateng 2019; Bretuo 2021; Djorbua *et al.* 2021). The diversity of multilingualisms and repertoires of teachers and learners has not been effectively accounted for, and research suggests that this policy is not always practically implemented in schools (Owu-Ewie & Eshun 2015; Djorbua *et al.* 2021). This policy does, however, contrast to the current situation in Malawi, in which the multilingual repertoires of citizens are ignored within education and English dominates the top-down policy perspectives as the only language which is both valuable within education and valuable for learners in their future lives. The key ideological difference is that Malawian policy views monolingualism as valuable and multilingualism as a problem, while in Ghana multilingualism, to a certain extent, is positioned as a resource. The next sections will look at how these different policy perspectives actually manifest in reality in both countries and how this affects practices and attitudes within education.

4 Reality of multilingualism in primary classrooms

This section presents classroom observation data which provides insight into the language practices found within primary schools in Malawi and Ghana. This will highlight the extent to which the top-down legislation influences classroom language practices and also provide a comparison of the practices found in each country.

In Malawi, classroom observations were conducted in early 2019 in eight primary schools across two districts (Mangochi and Nsanje) by the Centre for Language Studies at the University of Malawi. The two districts were purposively sampled because of their linguistic make-up. Mangochi is a predominantly Ciyawo speaking district, where it is possible to find learners coming to school for the first time that lack or have limited knowledge of Chichewa or English. In Mangochi, two schools from strictly Ciyawo-speaking communities were sampled, plus two other schools from mixed communities (Ciyawo and Chichewa). Nsanje district is predominantly Cisena speaking, where it is possible to find learners coming to school for the first time that lack or have limited knowledge of Chichewa or English. Out of the four schools in Nsanje district, two were from typical rural areas where Cisena language was predominant. The other two were of semi-urban nature where native speakers of Cisena and non-native speakers were learning in the same class. While these observations come six years after the announcement of the new policy, the findings indicate that the primary school classrooms in the study are multilingual environments. There is also a lack of awareness amongst school staff and students of the existence of an English-only policy. This suggests a substantial lack of any effective roll-out plan for the implementation of the policy.

In direct contrast to the monolingual English-only policy, the language practices which were observed in the primary schools in the Mangochi and Nsanje districts were highly multilingual. In the majority of observations, learners used resources from at least three languages—English, Chichewa, and the local language associated with the district (Ciyawo in Mangochi and Cisená in Nsanje). Further, there was little use of English in Standards 1–4, increasing only in Standards 5–8. In addition, throughout the year groups in each of the schools, students displayed clear difficulty when presented with English-only instructions. They were unable to effectively comprehend content or tasks and chose to answer questions and conduct group discussions in their familiar language. In the classes observed, students were not penalised for using languages other than English, with teachers often not using strictly English-only MOI themselves. For example, in a Standard 4 Agriculture lesson when a pupil answered a question using the Cisená term *mataka* (soil), the teacher replied in Chichewa *eya, dothi* (yes, soil).

In a more urban school within this district, a teacher was observed using resources from English, Chichewa, and Cisená to facilitate students' learning during a Standard 6 lesson on Communication. For example, after receiving no response to the question 'What do you understand by the word "Communication"?' the teacher repeated the question using Chichewa: '*Mukamva zoti Communication, mumati ndi chiyani?*' When discussing traditional methods of communication in this class, the teacher gave the example of 'giving a black chicken to the chief'. To ensure ease of understanding, the teacher then repeated this example in Cisená, a language more closely linked to students' linguistic and cultural heritage, stating: '*kwenda kwa mfumu kukapereka nkhuku yotchena*'. The teacher here is aware of the multilingual repertoires within the classroom and uses the linguistic resources available to ensure that their students understand the content of the lesson, independently of what any language policy stipulates. However, despite the multilingual reality of the classrooms, staff involved in the study were favourable towards the use of English-only from Standard 1, believing that the current multilingual approach will have adverse effects for students' acquisition of English and during their examinations.

Teachers and headteachers in the eight schools involved indicated that there was no official roll out of the English-only policy, and they had not received any direct communication relating to the New Education Act. The majority of the Malawian teachers interviewed were in fact unaware of any policy change, as exemplified by one teacher who stated:

I am not aware of the English-only policy, but I am only aware of the policy that stipulates that Chichewa is the language of instruction from Standard 1 to 4 and English from Standard 5 to 8.

This lack of communication has resulted in a situation in which there is little awareness amongst front-line educators of the existence of an English-only policy. The majority of those involved in this study stated that the current policy was that Chichewa should be used for the first four years of education, and thereafter English should be introduced as the medium of instruction in full.

Similar multilingual practices are apparent in Ghanaian primary schools. Unlike Malawi, these practices are, however, mandated by the policy being followed in the schools as the public schools observed adopt a bilingual medium of instruction. Classroom observations were conducted in 2012 and 2014 in four schools in Ho in the Volta Region. Ho township was chosen because this is one of the towns where Ewe is predominately spoken, and both Ewe and English are used in schools as mediums of instruction as well as subjects of study. In these classrooms, the majority of the pupils were bilingual in Ewe and English with some having other languages in their repertoire, including Akan (Twi), Ga, Hausa, and French. Some of the pupils were monolingual English speakers, and there were a few pupils who were monolingual in Ewe.

Multilingual speakers have the capacity to construct sentences or phrases that reflect the linguistic knowledge of their repertoires, and these practices are evident in classrooms observations from Ghana. For example, during a Language and Literacy lesson in a class 3 classroom, the teacher asked the pupils '*ne emu dumí de dɔlele ka míaxɔ*' (when you are bitten by mosquito, which type of sickness will you catch). A pupil responded using the English term 'malaria', which the teacher then used in their response to the pupil, saying '*ne míxɔ malaria ne mímeyí kɔdzi kaba o tsie adzɔ*' (if you catch *malaria* and you do not go to the hospital on time what will happen?). During these Ewe Language and Literacy lessons, both Ewe and English were activated, and the teacher and the pupils were thus in a bilingual mode. The example given above illustrates the ways in which individuals will naturally use their multilingual repertoires in their day to day lives. Multilingual practices between English and Ewe were frequent in the classrooms observed, and an artificial monolingualism is not enforced within the classroom.

The following extract is a Language and Literacy lesson in a class 1 classroom. The topic of the lesson was road safety. The extract below highlights how multilingualism can be brought into the classroom and used to scaffold learning.

Teacher: Ke le *vegbeme road safety* le *vegbeme nye nuka*? Yema menlɔ ɔe afima mekae atɛnu agblɔe nam? Newó kpɔ ekpea dzi in *English* is what '*road safety*' then Ewe version is here. Mekae atɛnu agblɔe le *evege* me nam? *Hurry up! We are waiting for you.*

(So in Ewe what is road safety in Ewe? That is what I have written there who can tell me? When you see the board in English is what road safety then Ewe version is here. Who can tell me in Ewe? *Hurry up! We are waiting for you.*)

Pupils: ((unintelligible speech from pupils))

Teacher: *Ah ha. Can you read the Ewe version for us? Yes*

Pupil 1A: *Míafe dedienɔnɔ le modzi.* (Our safety on the road)

Teacher: Ah ha. Dedienɔɔ. (Ah ha. Safety)

Pupils: Dedienɔɔ (safety)

Teacher: Dedienɔɔ le lɔrimɔwo dzi. (Safety on the road)

Pupils: Dedienɔɔ le lɔrimɔwo dzi. (Safety on the road)

Teacher: Dedienɔɔ le lɔrimɔwo dzi. (Safety on the road)

Pupils: Dedienɔɔ le lɔrimɔwo dzi. (Safety on the road)

Teacher: *And in English it is what?*

Teacher and pupils: *Road safety.*

Teacher: *Road*

Pupils: *Safety*

Teacher: *Road*

Pupils: *Safety*

Here we see that the teacher introduced the topic in English and asked the pupils to provide the equivalent in Ewe. One pupil then reads the Ewe version of the topic on the board and the teacher and the pupils repeated the topic in Ewe. Finally, the topic was reiterated in English by both the teacher and the pupils. The teacher in this example actively creates space for multilingualism in the classroom and encourages students to draw from a range of resources in their linguistic repertoires, by asking the pupils to provide both the Ewe and English versions of the topic. The conversation exchange shows that both the teacher and the pupils were in a multilingual mode during the lesson as both Ewe and English were activated.

As can be seen from the brief examples discussed above, primary classrooms in both Malawi and Ghana are clearly multilingual environments, in which teachers and learners bring their multilingual repertoires to the classroom and utilise these resources to engage in learning and teaching. The most important distinction in these contexts is that the multilingual practices observed within the Ghanaian classrooms are sanctioned by policy whereas those in Malawi are in contradiction to the policy. Data from Malawi highlights that there is little evidence of the English-only policy actually being implemented. While the policy was to be implemented from September 2014, it is unclear from the data collected so far that any implementation has in fact occurred. Regardless of the policy choices made by government, the multilingual realities of each classroom manifest during lessons.

5 Language attitudes

Language attitudes and language policy legislation interact and influence one another in complex ways. Knowledge of stakeholder language attitudes, and understanding the ideologies informing them, can play a key role in the successful implementation of language policies. The classroom observation data discussed above highlights the

multilingual reality of educational spaces in both Ghana and Malawi—whether this aligns with, or is in opposition to, the official policy. This section will provide brief insights into the attitudes of teachers in these different multilingual contexts. The data was obtained through interviews and questionnaires and in each context was obtained during the periods of classroom observation data discussed above.

Studies on attitudes towards language-of-education in multilingual contexts present varying perspectives. This is clearly displayed in the attitudes of teachers in the Ghanaian schools. Echoing the perspective of established academic research on mother tongue education, one teacher notes:

It is widely accepted that children learn to read better in their mother tongue which is familiar to them, when this concept has been established they learn to read in the second language.

Similarly, another Ghanaian teacher recognises the necessity of using languages other than English and drawing on the learners' linguistic repertoires to create effective learning environments, saying:

As the saying goes 'all fingers are not equal', most students speak and write English in schools especially the young ones but when it comes to teaching and learning, one must sometimes use the local language to break down their levels of knowledge and understanding which will make them interested in a particular subject.

These teachers highlight that familiar languages perform essential functions in the classroom through developing learners' knowledge, which can then be expanded on in an additional language. They also point out that familiar languages can engage learners in their content learning and multilingual approaches can be used to facilitate teaching and learning.

However, the multilingual repertoires found within the classroom are not viewed in a positive light by all teachers. For some teachers, the use of more than one language is viewed through a deficit lens and as something which will have a negative impact on the long-term educational outcomes for learners. As one teacher highlights:

It will cause the pupils to relax in making effort to understand the English language.

There is a sense here that rather than viewing multilingualism as something which can improve educational experiences, it is instead something which can hinder acquisition of English. Multilingual practices are also viewed by some teachers as something which could confuse learners and could have negative impacts across their linguistic repertoire.

It will not help pupils to use the right expressions for English and Ewe. We can translate statement from Ewe to English but mixing the two languages at the same time can be confusing to [the] children.

These negative attitudes towards multilingualism in education were widespread in the data obtained from the Malawian teachers. The majority of teachers were in favour of a strict English-only MOI as they believe that if English is used more frequently, and introduced early, then it will increase learners' fluency. This is despite the recognition that this presents communication challenges in classrooms as they acknowledge many learners do not understand teachers when they use English. Rather than supporting a multilingual approach, such as that presented in the classroom observation data highlighted above, the optimal solution is believed to be the use of English. As two teachers stated:

If we use English only from standard 1 they will get used [to it].

I think it would be good to teach in English to achieve competency.

The overarching message from teachers' attitudes in the Malawian schools is that the acquisition of English is one of the key goals of education. So valuable is English perceived to be that this is then pursued even if it is to the detriment of learning in other content subjects. This is primarily due to the belief that English is a key language for learners to have access to opportunities in their life after education, as noted by one teacher:

The English-only medium should be preferred as it would make learners to speak English fluently. English is important for future life as English is key. Government should introduce English from standard 1.

The relationship between beliefs and policy is cyclical, and these beliefs on the value and suitability of English within education are reinforced by the policy discourse, which positions English as the only suitable language within education.

While there is positivity towards multilingual strategies in the Ghanaian data, overall from the teachers involved in these two contexts, it can be seen that perceptions around the necessity of acquiring English language skills in education acts as a strong factor in influencing language attitudes. The function of education is to provide learners with the skills they need to flourish in their lives. As English is believed to be the language through which individuals can flourish, this appears to strongly influence attitudes towards favouring the use of English as MOI. While this is a common belief in a number of contexts globally, there is insufficient evidence to support this claim. It also risks viewing English as a panacea, ignoring other material and social constraints which inhibit an individual's ability to lead a fulfilling life. Recent studies in Ghana and Malawi suggest that rather than English being the sole language which can improve life outcomes, multilingual skills are necessary in the labour market and provide individuals with positive job prospects ([Dzimhiri 2019](#), [Atitsogbui *et al.* 2021](#), [ResCue *et al.* 2021](#)).

6 Discussion and conclusion

This article has detailed and compared the language-in-education policy situation in Ghana and Malawi through discussion of three main areas: policy legislation; classroom language practices; and teacher attitudes.

The key difference in these two countries is at the level of policy legislation and the ways in which this engages with the specific multilingual context. Malawi's current policy is monolingual, while Ghana's is more multilingual. At a policy level, in Ghana, the multilingual repertoires of learners are embraced, to a limited extent, in the early years of education, while in Malawi they are ignored. However, in Ghana this is still limited to only the government-sponsored languages and to the early years of school from kindergarten to grade 3.

There are a number of similarities between the contexts. Both have had numerous fluctuations in language policy over the past century and a policy vagueness and confusion persists in each country. Policy, where it exists, is often relegated to a few minor sentences in other educational documents and is not accompanied by an effective, detailed, and realistic implementation plan. This lack of implementation is most acutely seen in Malawi, in which a number of educators are unaware of the recent change to language-in-education policy. This then calls us to question what the purpose of language policy legislation is within these contexts. As the classroom data discussed illustrate, there can be a mismatch between policy and practice as despite different legislation, in practice classroom contexts are multilingual in both countries. However, by not recognising the multilingual realities of learners and of their classrooms, monolingual English-dominant policy can lead to the marginalisation of the language practices of learners from minoritised language groups.

The dominant position of English in language-in-education policy is evident in both countries. The attitude data discussed highlight that teachers view English as a key language for their pupils to learn, and this has a significant influence on their reported attitudes towards policy. While reported attitudes value English, the language practices in each context indicate that multilingual practices are being used positively by learners and teachers to facilitate learning and engage students with their education. Policy makers in these contexts, and other contexts in Africa and beyond, could learn a valuable lesson by paying attention to the ways in which multilingualism is already being harnessed within education to inform more inclusive and effective language policy.

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