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**Language-in-Education Policy of Malawi:
Planning Gaps and Implementation
Challenges for Primary Education**

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Abstract

This study examined the planning and implementation of Malawi's Chichewa–English language policy in public primary schools, focusing on how preparatory procedures influenced its enactment. Guided by Haddad and Demsky's seven-step policy framework, the research used a qualitative case study approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews and classroom observations in rural and urban schools. Findings revealed weaknesses in technical knowledge, resource provision, stakeholder engagement and institutional stability. Many implementers misunderstood the policy, lacked clear guidelines, and inconsistently applied it. Teacher shortages and limited multilingual skills hindered achievement, exacerbated by insufficient materials and a lack of documentation. Stakeholder participation was limited, with frontline actors excluded from policy formulation and training, while politicisation restricted involvement. Political changes disrupted continuity, prioritising political agendas over pedagogy. These challenges arose from a top-down, poorly researched planning process that created gaps between policy and practice. The study recommended evidence-based preparation, inclusive consultation, coordinated resource allocation, and stable leadership to strengthen language-in-education policies in multilingual, resource-limited settings.

Keywords: *Chichewa, English, language-in-education policy, Malawi, primary education*

Introduction

Malawi is a small but multilingual nation, with over sixteen languages (Chimpololo, 2024). Chichewa predominates in the central and southern regions, while Chitumbuka is common in the north. Language choices in education have long been politically and socially charged, reflecting

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broader struggles over identity, unity and development. During the colonial period, policies fluctuated. In 1918, Sir George Smith resisted promoting a single national language, fearing political unity (Mchazime, 2001). By contrast, Sir Shenton Thomas and Sir Harold Kittermaster later supported elevating Chinyanja (now Chichewa), which was formally recognised in 1936. At independence in 1964, Malawi retained a multilingual policy featuring Chinyanja, Chitumbuka and English, though political pressure soon centralised linguistic authority. In 1968, Chinyanja was renamed Chichewa, declared the sole national language and used as the medium of instruction from Standards 1–4, with English taking over from Standard 5 (Kamwendo, 2010). The dominance of Chichewa was both cultural and political, entrenching the Chewa heritage as central to national identity (Mkandawire, 2010). From 1989, all Standards 1–4 textbooks, except English, were published in Chichewa (Kretzer & Kumwenda, 2016).

In 1996, the United Democratic Front (UDF) government introduced a multilingual policy directing that Standards 1–4 be taught in the 'mother tongue', the most commonly spoken language in a school's area (Kamwendo, 2008). Intended to enhance participation and comprehension, the policy was implemented without prior research, resource planning or teacher preparation, leading to resistance from parents, teachers and other stakeholders (Kamwendo, 2008). Opposition centred on English's perceived economic and social value as an official language. In 2014, a new directive, the 'Kanyumba English Only Policy', named after the then Minister of Education Lucious Kanyumba, mandated English as the medium of instruction from Standard 1, citing concerns over poor English proficiency among school leavers (Mchombo, 2017). The directive started an intense debate.

For example, academics and students at the University of Malawi argued that conceptual understanding, not linguistic proficiency, should be the primary focus, citing global examples in which local languages underpin development. Critics warned of disadvantaging learners and unprepared teachers, while supporters pointed to regional precedents in Zambia, Botswana and Swaziland. Despite dissent, the Ministry of Education upheld the directive, invoking its legal basis in the 2013 Education Act. However, the Chichewa–English arrangement remains dominant in public primary schools. The Malawian case illustrates the complexity of language choice in multilingual societies. Policy shifts have usually been politically driven, top-down and insufficiently researched, leading to implementation challenges and persistent public controversy (Chipolopolo, 2025).

From the colonial period, Malawi's school language policies have shifted repeatedly, yet implementation challenges persist. The 1968 Chichewa–English arrangement, the 1996 mother tongue directive, and the 2014 English-only policy faced problems due to inadequate preparation, insufficient resources and limited stakeholder engagement. In practice, deviations from official policy have been the norm, as teachers resort to using the local languages they are fluent in, particularly in the early grades (Kretzer & Kumwenda, 2016). While much scholarship has examined the challenges of implementing language policies, little attention has been paid to the preparation processes that precede implementation, particularly teacher training, learner readiness, resource provision and support mobilisation. Therefore, this study investigates how preparation processes influence the implementation of the Chichewa–English policy in public primary schools in Malawi. The following research questions guide the study:

1. How were teachers and learners prepared for the Chichewa-English language-in-education policy implementation?
2. Were required material resources made available for the policy implementation?
3. How was support for the policy mobilised before implementation?

Literature Review

Understanding the implementation of language-in-education policies requires engagement with broader public policy theories and country-specific evidence. Although policy processes are usually presented as linear and rational cycles (Jann & Wegrich, 2017), research across Africa indicates that the actual policymaking is typically fragmented, politically contested and

operationally constrained. Malawi's shifting language policies since 1968 exemplify this divergence between policy design and practice. This section reviews the relevant literature under three integrated themes: (1) distortions in policy processes, (2) historical and contemporary challenges in Malawi's language-in-education reforms, and (3) resource, pedagogical and stakeholder factors that shape policy enactment.

Firstly, studies on public policy in developing countries show that agenda setting and policy prioritisation are mainly influenced by political bargaining, elite preferences and donor pressures rather than by evidence or public need (Kalu, 2017). This reality complicates rational policy cycles and reduces the likelihood that complex educational reforms receive careful preparation. Ajulor (2018) emphasises that policy implementation in Africa frequently falters due to mismatches between ambitions and administrative capacity, insufficient resources and inadequately prepared implementers. Similar insights emerge from comparative work in East and Southern Africa, where language policies mostly reflect political symbolism more than pedagogical considerations. When policy formulation is detached from institutional realities, implementation becomes fragmented, inconsistent and vulnerable to failure.

Secondly, Malawi's language-in-education reforms since the late 1960s illustrate these systemic challenges. The 1968 directive that introduced Chichewa as the medium of instruction for Standards 1–4 was implemented without research, teacher preparation or resource planning. Studies by Mjaya et al. (2006) and Kamwendo (2010) show that many teachers were unable to use Chichewa effectively, leading to code-switching and superficial compliance during inspections. The 1996 expansion of mother-tongue instruction to five vernaculars replicated these weaknesses. Kayambazinthu (1998) and Kamwendo (2008) note that the directive lacked linguistic mapping, classroom-level readiness assessments and adequate training, resulting in widespread teacher resistance and classroom improvisation. The 2014 English-only directive (Kanyumba policy) similarly reflected political pressures surrounding English as a language of socioeconomic mobility (Mchombo, 2017). Scholars argue that this reform prioritised perceived economic benefits over evidence of learners' need for linguistic scaffolding in the mother tongue (Chiuye & Moyo, 2008; Chipolopolo, 2025). Across these policy cycles, Malawi exhibits what Kretzer and Kumwenda (2016) call 'policy volatility', where shifts in political leadership drive abrupt language policy changes without addressing underlying structural constraints.

Thirdly, successful language policy implementation requires aligned instructional materials, teacher guides and assessments. Yet Malawi has faced chronic shortages of textbooks, inconsistencies between curriculum materials and the language of instruction, and limited multilingual proficiency among teachers. Kaphesi (2003) and Chauma (2012) document tensions created by English-language teacher guides for subjects taught in Chichewa, forcing teachers to translate technical concepts without adequate linguistic support. Similar findings across sub-Saharan Africa show that such 'pedagogical translation burdens' compromise learning outcomes. Resource scarcity also intersects with teacher deployment patterns. The introduction of Free Primary Education in 1994 increased enrolment dramatically, exacerbating teacher shortages and leading to the recruitment of underqualified teachers, many of whom lacked proficiency in English or Chichewa (Kretzer & Kumwenda, 2016). These conditions limit teachers' ability to carry out policy directives and result in inconsistent language practices across classrooms.

Lastly, a recurring theme in the literature is the limited participation of teachers, parents and local actors in policy formulation and review. Rose (2003) and Warren (2005) emphasise that meaningful engagement enhances legitimacy, fosters ownership and supports implementation. However, Malawian studies consistently show that stakeholders are engaged only after decisions are finalised, often symbolically rather than substantively (Rose, 2003; Chiuye & Moyo, 2008). School committees, while tasked with resource mobilisation, lack training and authority to shape policy decisions or to hold implementers accountable. The literature also highlights the political nature of language policy reform. Frequent leadership changes and shifting political agendas create discontinuities in policy implementation and erode institutional memory (Mkandawire, 2010). This instability hinders long-term strategic planning and reinforces the gap between policy intention and practice.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, the analytical perspective draws on Haddad and Demsky's (1995) policy cycle framework, which offers an integrative framework for examining the education policy process from inception to iteration. Haddad and Demsky (1995) explain that new policies typically emerge in response to disruption, whether from a crisis, political decision or restructuring. In its ideal form, this process begins with clear problem identification, advances through careful formulation and evaluation of options, moves to adoption based on balanced cost–benefit considerations and continues through implementation, impact evaluation and, if needed, adjustment.

However, as we have seen in the Malawian context, the actual decision-making is shaped less by problem-solving logic and more by political expediency, risk minimisation and institutional constraints. The policy cycle framework does not claim to describe policy in linear precision; instead, it distils essential elements of the process into analysable components. The value of such a model lies not in its predictive power, but in its ability to structure inquiry, reveal the interplay of contextual and institutional forces, and guide systematic reflection on policy formulation, implementation and review, as shown in Figure 1 below.

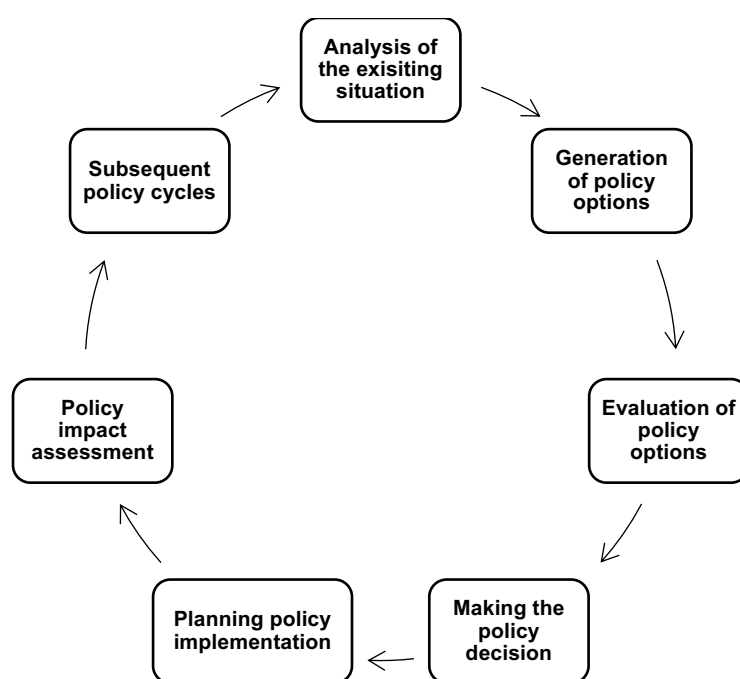


Figure 1: Policy Cycle Framework

As shown in Figure 1 above, each stage provides analytical entry points for understanding how a policy evolves and what conditions facilitate, or undermine, its success. These stages are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of Stages in Policy Cycle Framework

Stage	Implication
Analysis of the existing situation	Policy changes in education respond to deficiencies and emerging challenges, shaped by political, economic, demographic, cultural and social contexts. Country backgrounds, including geography, cultural norms and social hierarchies, influence priorities and power distribution, while disparities in access fuel contestation. Political contexts determine authority and ideological direction, often creating tensions between elites and technocrats. Economic conditions set fiscal limits and reform opportunities. In education, historical evolution and systemic challenges reveal persistent bottlenecks. Interest

	groups, bureaucratic incentives and external actors shape reform outcomes. Policies detached from these realities risk irrelevance or failure.
Generating policy options	Policy options emerge through different modes, each reflecting varying mixes of rational analysis, political responsiveness and opportunism. The systematic mode relies on evidence and professional expertise, offering comprehensive but often slow responses vulnerable to political impatience. The incremental mode address immediate pressures through small adjustments rather than structural change. The ad hoc mode arises from external shocks, such as political upheavals or leadership changes, forcing rapid, weakly grounded shifts. The importation mode borrows foreign innovations, succeeding only when adapted to local contexts. Identifying the mode, or combination of modes, explain both policy design features and their vulnerabilities.
Evaluating policy options	Evaluation requires modelling both reform processes and outcomes using three criteria: desirability, affordability and feasibility. Analysts assess benefits, trade-offs and ideological fit; financial, political and social costs; and institutional capacity for sustainability. Explicitly weighing these dimensions help anticipate implementation challenges, resource constraints and political resistance.
Making the policy decision	In practice, policy decisions rarely flow neatly from prior analysis. Political bargaining, ministerial agendas and time pressures often shortcut deliberative stages. The chosen policy may be a compromise that satisfies no stakeholder fully but secures the broad coalition needed for implementation. Analytically, the decision point is a moment to interrogate the process integrity, whether evidence was considered, how far the decision departs from existing policy and whether the decision is operationally coherent.
Planning policy implementation	This is the pivot from intention to action. Implementation planning requires specificity: defining roles, securing resources, training personnel and establishing timelines. It also demands political mobilisation, ensuring that stakeholders, from teachers to parents, perceive the reform as legitimate and beneficial. Without such mobilisation, even well-designed policies risk sabotage or indifference. Importantly, implementation is itself a site of policy formation. Constraints encountered on the ground lead to adjustments, sometimes substantial enough to redefine the original policy. Pilot projects, phased rollouts and feedback loops can mitigate the risks of overreach and miscalculation.
Policy impact assessment	Impact assessment should be timed to allow for meaningful evaluation, avoiding premature judgments skewed by the novelty effect. The critical analytical task is to disentangle whether shortcomings stem from flawed design or weak implementation. If implementation was sound but results fall short, the policy logic itself may require revision. If implementation was faulty, capacity-building or resource adjustments may be the remedy. Assessment must revisit the original evaluation criteria, desirability, affordability, feasibility, while recognising that these conditions may have shifted since the policy's inception.
Subsequent policy cycles	In theory, the process is cyclical, with assessment findings feeding into new rounds of analysis, option generation and decision-making. In practice, this feedback loop is often broken; policies are 'closed' rather than iterated. The analytical challenge is to identify whether learning is institutionalised or whether new policies begin afresh, repeating past mistakes.

Critics argue that the framework overstates the rationality and orderliness of policymaking. Field evidence from African case studies shows that stages often coincide, that political events can leapfrog analytical processes and that policies evolve in response to shifting alliances and pressures rather than linear logic. However, the utility of the framework lies precisely in its capacity to impose analytical order on a messy reality. By treating each stage not as a sequential step but as a recurring challenge, analysts can apply the framework flexibly to capture the interplay of structured decision-making and emergent adaptation. We choose this framework because it is comprehensive, covering pre-decision context, decision-making and post-decision assessment. Its attention to political, economic and institutional variables makes it especially apt for studying reforms in environments where resources are constrained and governance is contested. Furthermore, the explicit focus on planning for implementation aligns with our central research concern: understanding the conditions under which the Chichewa–English policy could be effectively enacted. By using the framework analytically, the study is not bound by its linear structure but leverages its categories to examine the complexity of policymaking. The model thus serves less as a prescriptive blueprint and more as a diagnostic tool, allowing us to trace causal links, identify leverage points and anticipate challenges across the policy process.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Yin, 2018) to examine the development and implementation of Malawi’s Chichewa–English language-in-education policy. A case study approach enabled an in-depth analysis of a single policy episode. It provided the flexibility required to trace processes, interpret stakeholder perspectives and situate findings within the broader institutional and sociolinguistic context. Fieldwork was conducted in Malawi’s public primary education sector, where the policy exerts its most immediate influence. A multilingual population characterises the setting, a long-standing debate over language choice in schooling and persistent structural constraints, all of which shape the implementation environment.

Data was generated from two complementary sources. First, semi-structured interviews were carried out with key actors across the education system. Participants included policymakers, senior ministry officials, curriculum developers, teacher trainers, headteachers, classroom teachers, learners and representatives from parent associations. The semi-structured format ensured comparability across interviews while allowing probing of emergent themes. Second, non-participant classroom observations were conducted in selected schools to document how policy directives were enacted in practice, with field notes capturing instructional language use, pedagogical strategies and interactions between teachers and learners.

Participants (16) and sites (two) were selected purposively (Cohen et al., 2018) to ensure representation of individuals directly involved in policy formulation, implementation and oversight. Schools reflected variation in geographical location (urban, peri-urban and rural), resource availability and linguistic composition. Within schools, teachers with experience implementing the Chichewa–English policy were approached to ensure a mix of veteran and early-career educators. Snowball sampling (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019) supplemented recruitment by identifying additional relevant stakeholders. Table 2 summarises the demographic characteristics of participants in both rural and urban sites.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Participant Role	Rural Site (Gender / Age / Service)	Urban Site (Gender / Age / Service)
District Education Office (DEO)	Female 25 years' service	Male 27 years' service
Primary Education Advisor (PEA)	Male 23 years' service	Female 25 years' service
Parent Teacher Association (PTA)	Male 4 years' service	Female 8 years' service
Headteacher	Male	Female

	34 years' service	20 years' service
Teacher 1	Male 29 years old Classes 3–4	Female 27 years old Lower primary
Teacher 2	Male 30 years old Classes 7–8	Female 24 years old Upper primary
Pupil 1	Male 8 years old Standard 4	Male 7 years old Standard 3
Pupil 2	Male 12 years old Standard 7	Male 14 years old Standard 8

Data analysis followed a thematic approach guided by Haddad and Demsky's policy cycle framework. Analysis progressed iteratively. Interview transcripts, documentary materials and observation notes were subjected to initial coding, combining deductive codes derived from the seven stages of the policy cycle with inductive codes emerging from the data. Codes were subsequently organised into overarching themes, for example, political drivers of policy adoption, resource constraints shaping implementation and classroom-level adaptation strategies. These themes were then mapped onto the policy cycle stages to identify the contextual factors most salient at each stage. Finally, variations across sites and stakeholder groups were examined to illuminate areas of convergence and divergence.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation across data sources and participant groups (Flick, 2022). Interview claims were checked against classroom observations. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to verify the accuracy of summaries and preliminary interpretations. We maintained a reflexive journal to document considerations of positionality and analytic decisions throughout data collection and interpretation. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Malawi as part of the lead author's Master's project, from which this article is adapted. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with assurances of voluntary participation. Identifying information was anonymised, and permission for classroom observations was granted by school authorities and teachers.

Research Findings

Analysis of interviews, observations and documents revealed three interrelated challenges shaping the preparation for and implementation of the Chichewa–English language-in-education policy: (1) limited technical and pedagogical readiness among implementers, (2) inadequacies in human and material resourcing and (3) weak stakeholder engagement and institutional instability.

Limited Technical and Pedagogical Readiness among Implementers

A consistent theme was the limited conceptual clarity among policymakers and implementers. Ministry officials and school-level personnel frequently conflated policies with implementation strategies. As one interviewee observed, *"In Malawi, even a strategy becomes a policy"*. This ambiguity was reflected in widespread misinterpretations of the Free Primary Education uniform directive, which many considered a stand-alone policy. The absence of formal guidelines for the Chichewa–English policy further exacerbated this confusion. Teachers explained that no instructions were provided on how to address learners' comprehension challenges or on consequences for policy non-compliance, leaving the policy 'hanging' and difficult to enforce. These findings reinforce Haddad and Demsky's (1995) argument that implementers must master the policy content before implementation can succeed.

Confusion was also pronounced regarding the official language of instruction. A district official asserted that, *"Teachers are taught in Teacher Training Colleges that English should be used from*

standard 1 to 8, with Chichewa only as a support when learners do not understand". This perspective contrasted sharply with another DEO representative's account that *"Current practice is that Chichewa is used as the medium of instruction from standards 1 to 4, and English from standards 5 to 8, except when teaching the respective languages as subjects"*. Classroom observations overwhelmingly aligned with the latter description. These contradictory interpretations were compounded by Ministry-introduced English exams in lower grades, which teachers felt conflicted with the expectation of vernacular instruction. As one teacher asked, *"How do we use Chichewa as a medium of instruction in schools where it is not spoken?"*

Teacher training and linguistic readiness played a central role in these tensions. Several teachers reported difficulty using Chichewa as the language of instruction because their pre-service training had emphasised English-based pedagogy. Conversely, in upper primary classes, teachers demonstrated limited English proficiency. Observations showed frequent translation into Chichewa to help learners follow lessons. One pupil articulated the resulting challenge: *"My first encounter with English as a language of instruction was in Standard 5, so I'm not comfortable using it throughout the lessons"*. These patterns demonstrate a mismatch between teachers' training, their actual linguistic competencies and the policy's demands. These patterns are also reflected in Adamson's (2024) findings from Tanzania.

Inadequacies in Human and Material Resourcing

Resource limitations further constrained policy readiness. Following the introduction of Free Primary Education in 1994, rapid enrolment increases led to the recruitment of underqualified teachers. One teacher lamented, *"Many of the newly deployed teachers can't construct grammatically correct English sentences, yet they are expected to teach in English. Where does this leave our students?"* Participants repeatedly emphasised that these teachers lacked both linguistic proficiency and foundational pedagogical skills. This finding echoes Kayambazinthu's (1998) criticism that Malawi's language-in-education policies have often been implemented before teachers were adequately prepared.

Material resources were similarly inadequate. Respondents across schools noted the absence of written policy documents specifying the language(s) of instruction. A headteacher remarked, *"It is challenging to hold teachers accountable when there is no official document to refer to regarding language use"*. DEO personnel corroborated this, explaining that many policies in Malawi are communicated verbally and that *"some policies are just chaotic, some not even known to those tasked with implementing them"*. This lack of documentation meant that teachers relied on informal language use practices unless directly supervised.

Textbooks and teaching materials were also insufficient for both Chichewa and English. Although teacher guides were available in English for most subjects, schools lacked sufficient learner textbooks. Teachers reported routinely improvising by sharing limited materials or photocopying pages. One learner summarised the challenge: *"Not having enough books makes it even harder to understand lessons in English"*. The Ministry's claim that materials were distributed through the Supplies Unit was disputed by schools, which stated that most materials came from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and were often unrelated to school needs. As one teacher said, *"There's poor coordination between the Ministry and donor community. Most donations are not based on actual school needs"*.

Weak Stakeholder Engagement and Institutional Instability

Stakeholder engagement during policy formulation and preparatory phases was minimal. Teachers, PEAs, DEOs and PTA representatives consistently reported that they were excluded from contributing to policy design. One DEO respondent with three decades of experience stated, *"I have witnessed many changes in school language policies, but I was never consulted to provide input. Given my experience, I would have valuable contributions"*. Teachers echoed this frustration, explaining that this lack of involvement diminished their motivation to support the policy. Training workshops were similarly politicised: *"Workshop invitations are often based on favouritism or*

loyalty rather than knowledge and experience”, one teacher explained. This exclusion weakened implementers’ sense of ownership and contributed to inconsistent application in practice.

Finally, the findings reveal that political changes have heavily shaped the policy environment. Teachers and district officials described language policies as tools of political influence rather than pedagogically driven reforms. One teacher commented, *“Language policies have been used as political tools. The quality of education often declines when these shifts occur”*. Participants recounted how shifts across regimes, such as the 1968 Chichewa directive, the 1996 mother-tongue expansion and the 2014 English-only directive, occurred abruptly, without adequate preparation or research. The Ministry’s frequent leadership changes were described as a significant barrier to consistent implementation. As one participant noted, *“Policies are often imposed from the top without adequate consultation or follow-up. This top-down approach leads to ongoing problems in implementation”*. These dynamics recall Rosenblum and Louis’s (1981) observation that institutional stability is essential for effective reforms.

Discussion

The study’s findings point to a fundamental misalignment between the intentions of the Chichewa–English language-in-education policy and the conditions under which it was introduced. Drawing on Haddad and Demsky’s (1995) framework, the discussion interprets these findings by showing how gaps in technical capacity, contextual fit, teacher preparation, resource provisioning and institutional stability collectively constrained implementation.

A central issue emerging from the research is the limited technical understanding of policy among implementers. Although the policy demanded clarity on language use, teachers and Ministry officials frequently misinterpreted fundamental distinctions between policy and strategy. This is consistent with the conceptual confusion noted by Chimpololo (2024). The misclassification of the Free Primary Education uniform directive as a ‘policy’ illustrates this conceptual slippage. From a policy process perspective, this reflects a weakness at the very first stage of Haddad and Demsky’s model: if implementers cannot articulate the policy, its objectives, and modalities, it is difficult to apply consistently. Rather than simply being a failure of communication, the confusion signals deeper systemic issues, including the absence of structured orientation, sustained professional development and authoritative written guidance.

The findings also demonstrate a tension between the policy’s design and Malawi’s multilingual realities. Official directives have long oscillated between promoting English and Chichewa, yet neither approach adequately accounts for teachers’ or learners’ linguistic repertoires. Teachers in non-Chichewa-speaking areas expressed uncertainty about using Chichewa as the medium of instruction, and many pupils reported discomfort with English, especially when first encountering it as the language of instruction in Standard 5. These dynamics point to a mismatch between policy logic and linguistic capital, a key concept in Bourdieu’s (1991) theory, warning that language reforms that ignore existing distributions of linguistic capital risk marginalising those with less access to the prestige language. In this case, neither Chichewa nor English is equally accessible nationwide, meaning that policy shifts inadvertently deepen inequalities rather than addressing them. Haddad and Demsky emphasise the crucial role of contextual adaptation in planning policy implementation; the Chichewa–English policy illustrates what happens when this principle is sidelined.

Teacher preparation emerged as another fault line in implementation. The rapid expansion of enrolments after Free Primary Education (1994) created long-term consequences for teacher supply, with hurried recruitment leading to the entry of inadequately trained teachers (Kayambazinthu, 1998). These teachers’ limited English proficiency, and, in some cases, limited confidence in Chichewa, undermined the policy’s bilingual aims. This is not simply a personnel shortage but a structural issue in teacher education. Pre-service programmes have historically prioritised English-medium pedagogy, while in-service opportunities to build bilingual instructional competence remain sparse. The policy, therefore, rested on unrealistic assumptions about teachers’ linguistic and pedagogical readiness. From a policy implementation standpoint, this

represents a breach of the resource-availability pillar of Haddad and Demsky's model, which holds that human resources are foundational to policy success.

Material resourcing and documentation further complicated implementation. The near-total absence of written policy documents specifying the official language of instruction left teachers reliant on verbal directives and inconsistent supervisory messages. This undermined accountability and contributed to the 'free style' approaches observed in classrooms. Haddad and Demsky (1995) emphasise that documentation is not merely a bureaucratic artefact; it anchors interpretive authority, reduces ambiguity and enables monitoring. In the Malawian case, weak documentation combined with chronic shortages of learner textbooks, teacher guides and teaching materials created what Mercer (2014) describes as an unstable resource ecosystem, in which donor-driven materials often supersede Ministry planning and school needs remain unmet.

Stakeholder engagement was also notably absent. Teachers, PEAs and school leaders consistently reported their exclusion from the formulation and review of language policy, a pattern consistent with Ajulor's (2018) critique that African policy processes often marginalise frontline actors. The politicisation of training opportunities further eroded trust. From a governance perspective, this exclusion is consequential: stakeholder participation is not merely normative but also instrumental in building ownership and interpretive coherence. Without involvement, teachers respond to policy with resistance, superficial compliance or improvisation, all of which were evident in this study. Again, the failure reflects a broader disjuncture between ideal and actual policy cycles: decision-making bypassed participatory stages entirely, weakening implementation.

Institutional instability shaped the trajectory of language policy adoption and re-adoption. Malawi's frequent shifts between Chichewa, mother-tongue instruction and English-only directives demonstrate what Kretzer and Kumwenda (2016) refer to as 'policy volatility'. Such fluctuations, often linked to political agendas rather than pedagogical rationale, as highlighted by Mchombo (2017), disrupt continuity, undermine institutional memory and prevent long-term planning. Although district-level supervision by PEAs appeared more stable, national-level turnover limited follow-up and obscured responsibility for implementation challenges. Rosenblum and Louis (1981) argue that leadership continuity is essential to sustaining educational reforms; the Malawian case illustrates how instability instead cycles problems forward, producing recurring implementation failures.

These interpretive insights show that the Chichewa–English language policy was constrained not only by individual-level shortcomings but also by systemic weaknesses at every stage of the policy cycle. Technical misunderstanding, linguistic misalignment, insufficient teacher preparation, resource instability and political volatility collectively undermined the policy's coherence and feasibility. Rather than treating these issues as isolated challenges, we emphasise how they interact to reproduce implementation gaps characteristic of education reforms in resource-limited and politically fluid contexts.

Conclusion

This study reveals significant shortcomings in the implementation of Malawi's Chichewa-English language policy, emphasising that inadequate teacher and learner preparation, coupled with a lack of clear implementation guidelines, have resulted in inconsistent classroom language use. The unavailability of essential policy documents and teaching materials further hindered uniform policy enforcement and support. Crucially, limited stakeholder involvement during policy formulation weakened practical relevance and acceptance. Although there is institutional stability at the district level, frequent political changes at the Ministry of Education have led to shifting priorities and policy discontinuities driven by political rather than educational considerations. Successful policy implementation requires thorough preparatory training, stakeholder consultation, adequate resource allocation and stable leadership. Political will emerges as the pivotal factor in shaping language policy in multilingual contexts, where achieving public consensus and inclusivity is indispensable. Therefore, decision-makers should adopt evidence-based planning, ensure broad stakeholder engagement, provide sufficient resources, and implement ongoing monitoring and

evaluation. Addressing these factors is essential to improving educational quality and equity in Malawi's public primary schools.

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