Short report: Theory and reality in the primary English language class in Malawi

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Abstract

Malawi went through a curriculum review from 1989 to 1991. During this period, new learning materials in all the primary school subjects were developed and are in use now. From the theoretical point of view, the English language course is comparable to many of the communicative era materials. There is an emphasis on collaborative learning and functional use of language. The introduction to the Teachers' Guides points out that the key word in the course is "activity". A child only learns a language by doing things with the language.

Since the new curriculum was launched in 1991, not much has been done to monitor the effectiveness of the new materials. The immediate question that arises, therefore, is: Are the language lessons indeed activity based? This paper examines the extent to which class teachers use the collaborative strategies advocated in the new materials.

Key words

English language teaching, collaborative learning, language methodology, classroom interaction, classroom practice, curriculum implementation, second language teaching, teaching techniques, teaching strategies, communicative activities

Introduction

Malawi has been going through educational transformation since 1989. In that year, the government decided to adopt Chichewa (Chinyanja) as the medium of instruction in Standards 1, 2, 3 and 4. English is taught as a subject in these classes, although from Standard 5 it takes over as medium of instruction throughout the whole education system in the country. This innovation came together with changes in the primary school curriculum. The new curriculum was launched in 1991. Teaching and learning materials were developed and are currently in use in all schools.

From the theoretical point of view, the new English language materials are comparable to many materials of the communicative era pedagogy. There is an emphasis on collaborative learning and functional use of language. The introduction to the
Teacher's Guides points out that the key word in the course is "activity". A child only learns a language by doing things with it.

Since the new curriculum was launched in 1991, there has been virtually no systematic monitoring of the effectiveness of the new materials. This article examines the extent to which class teachers use the collaborative strategies advocated in the new English materials. The article puts the new curriculum in the context in which it is being implemented together with other changes in primary schools in the country, so it starts with a description of both the old and the new curricula and other related innovations in the primary school sector in Malawi.

The old curriculum

In order to appreciate the degree of challenge of the new curriculum to primary school teachers in Malawi, it is necessary to give a brief summary of the old curriculum, which the current one has replaced. The old curriculum was produced in 1966. Like curricula in other countries at that time, the syllabus was structurally-based (Ministry of Education 1966). Structures were carefully graded and basic English language sentence patterns provided.

Its accompanying materials were based on behaviourist psychology (Skinner 1957). In behaviourist psychology learning was seen as habit formation. To accomplish the desired habit, the principle of stimulus--response was applied. The materials were, therefore, built on the principle of constant practice and repetition of the basic sentence patterns to be mastered. Learners were supposed to attack each new structure and new sentence pattern blow by blow through imitation, repetition and memorisation. In the Teachers' Guides, there seemed to be an undeclared 'war' against learners' errors, as if errors are not part of the process of language learning. In reaction to this, Mchazime (1993:64) argues that such overprotection denied learners the opportunity to take risks in guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words--a situation that is contrary to the world outside the classroom environment.

In short, then, the advent of the new curriculum was a response to the general feeling that, in terms of language teaching, the country was still in the 1960s, teaching pupils to memorise decontextualised sentence patterns. The new curriculum is a marked departure from the old one.

The new curriculum

The new curriculum took into account research and developments in second language learning theories and approaches that had given shape to the practice of the 1970s and 80s. During this period, linguists and language teachers became increasingly dissatisfied with situational language teaching, questioning the linguistic theory underlying the method (Howatt 1984:280). As Brown (1987) observes, due to the
work of cognitive psychologists, most language teachers no longer looked at language as an object or as knowledge that can be acquired through stimulus-response principles. Instead, they viewed it as a complex phenomenon that involves the engagement of cognitive skills in order for acquisition to occur. Consequently, they drew upon theories of communication, theories of knowledge and insights from functional linguistics (Halliday 1970) to argue for a new approach to language teaching. They consolidated their argument by drawing upon insights from sociolinguistics (e.g. Hymes 1972:269-93) and philosophy (e.g. Austin 1962). This combination gave birth to the communicative approach to language teaching. Its distinguishing features were its emphasis on functional use and communicative potential of language. Since the new Malawian primary curriculum was a response to the dissatisfaction with the way English was being taught in primary schools in the country, expressed by both the public and language specialists, it was necessary to align it to the new language teaching approach.

As expected, the new curriculum is substantially different from the old one. The syllabus presents not only general objectives for the whole course but also for each Standard so that teachers are aware of what they are supposed to cover in a year. Unlike the old syllabus, which was built around structural and sentence patterns, the organisational framework for the new teaching syllabus is the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Functions and grammatical items are then provided together with suggested learning experiences, possible teaching and learning materials and suggestions for pupil assessment (see Malawi Institute of Education 1991 for more details). The course books that were developed to accompany the new curriculum (Activities with English for Malawi) put emphasis on a functional approach to teaching and learning. Thus, individual, pair, group, and whole class activities are provided or suggested to the teacher in order to begin to develop the learners' listening and speaking skills, thereby laying the foundations for their English language social skills. Such activities include games, role-play, and story telling.

In reading, pupils learn to use phonics to assist their word-attack skills as early as Standard 2, while other reading skills such as scanning, skimming, predicting and reading for detail are introduced in Standard 3. The use of the Wall Newsboard acts as a focal point where all the four language skills can be reinforced. Showpieces of pupils' written work are displayed, and carefully chosen pictures and articles are posted onto it. These form the basis for discussion in class, as well as providing the pupils with authentic reading material from the world outside the confines of the classroom. Thus listening, speaking, reading and writing are blended together. This blending is aptly summed up on the dust jacket of the Standard 4 (1996 revised edition) text as follows:
In Standard 4 pupils develop their analytical reading skills as they learn to recognise main ideas and topic sentences, and use this information to improve their writing skills as they first complete and then produce paragraphs of their own. Information transfer exercises require pupils to utilise their listening skills to complete diagrams and tables, while their speaking skills come to the fore as they translate information from plans and maps into verbal instructions for their friends. Once again, as in Standards 1-3, rhymes, song, stories and lots of role-play involve all the pupils in interesting activities.

Such, then, is the nature of the curriculum. It is a significant departure from the old one, representing a major paradigm shift for practising teachers. This paradigm shift poses a big challenge to the implementers in the classroom.

Other changes
In addition to the introduction of the new curriculum the government embarked on other changes. Of direct relevance to this paper is the declaration of free primary education in 1994. Implementation of this declaration resulted in a monumental increase in school enrollment. Almost overnight, the enrollment rose from 1.9 to 3.2 million. The number of new schools shot up and enrollment in existing schools increased dramatically. Consequently, there was an acute shortage of classrooms and teachers. The government immediately employed 22,000 untrained teachers who had just completed secondary school, and pledged to provide textbooks, pencils, and exercise books free. The number of untrained teachers employed represented 43% of the total primary school teaching force in the country.

With a shortfall of 38,000 classrooms (Ministry of Education 1996), some schools conduct their classes under trees while others operate in temporary classrooms with hardly any room for displays. Teacher-pupil ratio varies from 1:38 in urban areas to 1:72 in rural areas and there are some individual schools with a teacher pupil ratio of one to over a hundred (Mchazime & Siege 1998). In some schools, only the head-teacher is qualified. It is within this context that the new English language curriculum is being implemented in Malawi. With this background in mind, let us now see what is being done in the classroom.

Survey on the practice in the classroom
It was mentioned above that the new primary curriculum has not been closely monitored since it was launched in 1991. In 1996, the author conducted a small survey on the use of collaborative techniques contained in the new English language syllabus. The main purpose of the study was to find out how often teachers use group work, pair work, role-play, language games, and story telling.
Sample

The sample was 50 Standard 1-4 teachers drawn from 12 randomly selected schools in Zomba rural district. The teachers, both qualified and untrained, received a brief orientation to the new curriculum when the new coursebooks were introduced. No attempt was made to distinguish the teachers by gender although their qualifications were requested to give the researcher a general picture of their distribution.

Instruments and data collection

A questionnaire consisting of 16 items and statistical information about availability of instructional materials and class enrollment was developed. It was passed on to District Education Advisers and to a curriculum specialist for comments. Suggestions for improvements were discussed and incorporated into the final questionnaire.

The questionnaire was sent to the 12 schools through Teacher Development Centre Coordinators who were resident in the centres. Teacher Development Centres in Malawi are meeting places for teachers where professional workshops, meetings and other activities are conducted. The centres are located in central places serving a cluster of between 10 and 15 schools. Centre Coordinators are part of a communication network through which information from above often flows down to schools and from schools up to district education offices. By using this network the researcher was assured not only of quick return of the questionnaires but also of high returns. All 50 respondents completed and returned the questionnaires.

The first part of the questionnaire asked respondents to rate their use of the five techniques: group work, pair work, role-play, language games, and story telling, on a bipolar five-point scale using the key below.

A  I never use the technique at all
B  I rarely use it
C  I use it sometimes
D  I use it whenever the lesson suggests it
E  I always use it

Results

Data collected was then tallied and analysed. The results are given in Table 1, below. Teachers claimed they used all the five teaching skills in their English language lessons. The most popular was pair work, with 82% of the teachers using it either always (56%) or every time the lesson suggested (26%). All the teachers were able to use it at one time or another. Group work was also popular, with 52% of the teachers using it every time the lesson suggested it, and another 32% always using it, but as many as 20% said they never used group work. Story telling was used by the teachers up to 60% of the time, either every time the lesson suggested (46%) or always (14%). The least popular technique was language games, with 22% of the teachers never
using them at all and only 4% claiming that they always used them. However, 52% of the teachers still used language games every time the lesson suggested. In the case of role-play, like language games, it was used either every time the lesson suggested (52%) or always (4%). On the other hand, role play was never used by only 8% of the teachers.

Table 1: Teachers’ ratings of use of five teaching techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching technique</th>
<th>Ratings (% of teachers’ responses in each category)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair work</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role-play</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language games</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story telling</td>
<td>10</td>
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Teachers were also asked whether they had a Wall Newsboard in their classroom. Of the 50 teachers only 20% of them said they had Wall Newsboards and they used them for displaying pupils' work and other materials. The majority of the 80% who said they did not have them gave their reason as having no classrooms. Schools that have no classrooms often conduct their classes under trees. Some of them said their classrooms did not have doors. The security of Wall Newsboards was therefore the main concern. A few said they did not know how to make Wall Newsboards, while others flatly said they did not see their usefulness.

The respondents were then asked to state what they saw as their major problem in teaching English. Almost all of them cited how to handle large classes and how to cope with an inadequate supply of textbooks and other instructional materials. Some included too many teaching activities to be covered in a single lesson. Statistics from the twelve schools seem to support the two statements. For example, the 50 teachers were responsible for 7,332 pupils. This gives us a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:47. The highest class enrolment under one teacher was 390 and the lowest was 40. On the other hand, a teacher with 325 pupils in his class reported he had no textbooks while another with 45 reported that he had 70 textbooks.

Finally, respondents were asked two major areas in which they would like the Ministry of Education to run a course. The majority (74%) said they needed training in the use of the teaching techniques articulated in the Teachers' Guides and in how to handle large classes. The first response seems to be a contradiction to the ratings of the five teaching techniques above, but this may not necessarily be the case as will be observed later.
Discussion

Generally, it appears teachers used the full range of teaching techniques recommended in the Teachers' Guides in their English language lessons. It is perhaps not surprising that language games are not used as frequently as the other techniques. However, it is disappointing to note that role play, which usually creates the context for appropriate use of authentic language, was not used as often as either pair work or group work. It is also disturbing to note that story telling was not utilised somewhat more, particularly because story telling is an indigenous educational technique. Furthermore, given the responses to the question on training, discussed below, it is worth considering whether or not the teachers really did use pair and group work in the way that was intended by the authors of the curriculum.

The story is different for the Wall Newsboard. The majority of teachers never used it. Although the reasons for not doing so seem to be sound, the small number that said they do not see its value may be an indication that whatever orientation they received may not have had an impact. From a different point of view, this is an example of a mismatch between what curriculum and language experts think and what obtains in the classroom. To teachers whose main concern is shelter for their pupils whenever it rains, the Wall Newsboard is almost inconceivable. In theory, the Wall Newsboard is the “focal point” where pupils' written work and articles from the real world outside the classroom can be displayed to provide pupils with the opportunity to read “authentic” materials. In the real classroom situation, teachers see it as of less practical use. Thus the official and enacted curricula are at variance.

Although teachers acknowledged the use of the teaching techniques articulated in the new curriculum, their responses to the question on training seem to contradict this. However, this may not be the case for two reasons. First, it is possible that the brief training which the teachers went through only introduced the basic techniques, without giving them time to reflect. As Wallace (1991) points out, it is normal for professionals to reflect on their performance. It is through this professional reflection that teachers examine their practices and then generally feel unsure of themselves. In the words of Bolitho (1996:2), this uncertainty may manifest itself in, for example, “worries about being out of touch with new methodological developments, resistance to new course books, or doubts about their own language competence”. In other words, the reality in the classroom makes them feel that they are not performing according to what is perhaps supposed to be done.

Secondly, there is evidence elsewhere that sometimes there is disparity between what teachers believe happens in their class and what actually occurs. In a study of a number of communicative classrooms, Nunan (1986) found that very little was taking place that could be called communicative in the lessons he observed. Yet teachers believed they were implementing a communicative curriculum. To avoid this miscon-
cept, visits by supervisors who can ably advise the teachers would be beneficial. Teachers are sometimes too busy to reflect on their practice. This is particularly so for primary school teachers in Malawi because they are required to teach all the subjects on the curriculum. An external eye on their practice may help them see what is missing in their so-called communicative language teaching.

Turning to the major problems stated by the respondents, it is obvious that large class sizes and inadequate supply of textbooks have a negative impact on the planned curriculum. Teachers complained that discipline was a problem and that most of their time was spent on maintaining discipline in the classroom. This means that there was very little time in the lesson for them to teach. Some respondents actually questioned how they could control pair work or role-play in a class of 390 pupils. To them, "frontal" approaches were better than segmenting the class into hundreds of pairs. Unfortunately, "frontal" approaches are not suited to the development of communication skills.

As regards the inadequate supply of instructional materials, the consequences are clear. Bartlett and Butler (1985) provide five categories of curriculum. Two of them relate to both materials and implementation: the developed and the enacted curriculum. The developed curriculum consists of materials and an articulation of the processes to be followed in the enacted curriculum. The enacted curriculum is the implemented curriculum, consisting of classroom transactions between the teacher and the learners. The transactions are based on the materials and processes articulated in the developed curriculum. Lack of textbooks and other instructional materials at school level, therefore, not only makes implementation of curriculum difficult but, more seriously, it denies teachers access to the very processes which they are meant to go through with pupils as the curriculum is being implemented.

Curriculum materials are buttresses for untrained and inexperienced teachers. The results from the survey seem to confirm this. The fact that the largest number of teachers in the ratings above falls in D, i.e. "I use the technique whenever the lesson suggests it" (except for pair work), shows how dependent teachers are on textbooks and Guides.

In Malawi, the otherwise theoretically sound curriculum is being undermined by the acute shortage of coursebooks, large class sizes, lack of permanent classrooms, lack of adequate training in the approaches to the new curriculum and the presence of a large number of untrained teachers. These are the practical realities that English language teachers in Malawi have to contend with day by day.

Conclusion
This short paper has highlighted the context in which the 1991 primary English language curriculum is being implemented in Malawi. Teachers are working under
adverse conditions such as large classes, inadequate instructional materials and lack of permanent classrooms. Above all, although teachers claim that they generally use collaborative strategies embodied in the new curriculum, they are not confident enough with the strategies. This was revealed in their desire to have inservice courses in the new strategies and how to handle large classes.

However, the sample used in the study was small. The Ministry of Education should carry out another on a large scale. Such a study should take into consideration factors like urban versus rural setting, teacher qualification and teacher-pupil ratio. Additional, observational techniques should also be used. As we know, questionnaires do not capture the social context in which the curriculum is being enacted. Observation captures both the environment and the interaction in real life transactions in the classroom.

Obviously such a study will require financial support. It is particularly important for such a study to inform the new Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform process. Unfortunately, governments and organisations spend a lot of money on planning the curriculum process and set aside very little for training teachers and monitoring the implementation of the curriculum. They tend to forget that a "curriculum is as good as the quality of its teachers. Positively, a curriculum can be enriched by the creativity and imagination of the best teachers; negatively it is vitiated by the limitations of poor teachers and poor teacher training" (Bishop 1985:190).

On the other hand, given the fact that teachers were unanimous about the need for training, it is professionally prudent to consider mounting in-service courses for them so that they can perform to the expectations of the planned curriculum. If carefully planned, such courses could make a lot of difference in the day-to-day work of the teachers, because courses which are based on reflection (Wallace 1991) and real classroom problems are likely to be more rewarding to teachers than externally motivated training. Orientation courses planned by curriculum experts are externally motivated and are usually top-down. The courses requested by the teachers here are from within and are based on teachers' own internal vision of good practice.

References


Education Centre, College of St. Mark and St John, Plymouth.


