

First and Second Language Reading Proficiency of Year 3, 4 and 6 Children in Malawi and Zambia¹

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This paper reports on an investigation into L1 and L2 reading proficiency in two sub-Saharan African countries, Malawi and Zambia. In Malawi, Chichewa (the L1 in the schools investigated) is the medium of instruction for the first 4 years, with English as a subject. In Zambia, English is used as the medium of instruction from day 1, with the L1 (Nyanja in the schools tested) taught as a subject. Modified cloze tests in English and L1 were administered to over 450 pupils in each country. The results yielded large and statistically significant differences in favour of Malawi for reading proficiency in L1. The results of the English reading tests showed no significant difference between Malawian and Zambian pupils. Furthermore, in both countries the English results are low, suggesting that the majority of pupils cannot learn through English, as they are meant to be doing. The fact that Malawians outperform Zambians in the L1, while Zambians do not outperform Malawians in the L2 is attributed to the predominant "look and say" methodology in both countries. Whereas repetition in L1 is meaningful and can lead to learning, repetition in a language which is not understood is unlikely to do so.

INTRODUCTION

Reading in L1 and L2

Most research into acquisition and instruction in initial reading has been carried out for learners' first language. In the second language area "the teaching of reading" has generally referred to attempts to enhance the reading capacities of those who can already read, and research is generally at the intermediate level or above (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984; Carrell, Devine & Eskey, 1988). The early stage of reading in EFL/ESL is a relatively unresearched area and there remains, as Bialystok (1994) points out, much field research to be done. Exceptions to this general neglect are Kawtb (1981), Hudelson (1981) and Wallace (1988). This paper reports on the results of tests of reading proficiency in second language (English) and first language (Nyanja and Chichewa) in primary schools in two sub-Saharan African countries, Zambia and Malawi.

Reading

Reading is here taken to refer to the perceiving and understanding of written language. It would be distracting at this point to attempt to define reading in detail. Nonetheless, any consideration of reading may usefully distinguish the following three aspects: prerequisites to reading, processes of reading, and the product of reading.

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