

## Mother Tongue Debate and Language Policy in South Africa

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### Abstract

*This paper evaluates the current mother tongue debates and the South African Language Policy. The aim of the policy is to redress the injustices of Apartheid where English and Afrikaans were given a higher status at the expense of other languages. Prior to 1994 English and Afrikaans were used as official languages throughout South Africa. Only students whose mother tongue was English or Afrikaans were at an advantage. The majority of South Africans speak an African language as a home language. The rest of the population speaks other indigenous languages (National Department of Education, 1992). All that changed after 1994 when 11 languages were declared official languages and given the same status. This was a way of promoting African languages which were neglected in the past. Provinces were free to choose which of the official languages to declare an official languages at regional level (Barkhuizen and Gough, 1996). The vision of the African National Congress (ANC) government of promoting all 11 languages is just a symbolic gesture and is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. The South African government has not yet provided the human resources and physical resources needed to promote multilingualism. Practically speaking, English and Afrikaans still have a higher status than other languages. The value attached to these languages even by blacks themselves, undermines the survival of African Languages. The result is that many black South Africans make English their language of choice as a medium of instruction (cf. Dyers 2001; De Klerk 2000 and Banda, 2004). This makes prospects for an African language as an alternative medium of instruction at tertiary institutions appear very bleak, at least in the foreseeable future. This paper argues that mother tongue education be considered in South Africa if we hope to get good grades from students who come from rural schools*

**Key words:** South African Language Policy, indigenous languages, isiXhosa, medium of instruction, multilingualism.

### Introduction

This paper is on mothertongue education and the South African (SA) Language Policy which was introduced after 1994 when South Africa became a democratic country. Language Policy aims to redress the injustices of Apartheid where English and Afrikaans were given a higher status at the expense of other languages and also to facilitate access to good services, knowledge and information in order to meet client expectations and needs (Eastern Cape Language Policy). Prior to 1994 English and Afrikaans were used as official languages throughout South Africa. Only students whose mother tongue was English or Afrikaans were at an advantage. The majority of South Africans speak an African language as a home language. For example, there are about 22% Zulu speakers and 18% isiXhosa speakers while 16% speak Afrikaans and less than 10% speak English as their first language. The rest of the population speaks other indigenous languages (National Department of Education, 1992). All that changed after 1994 when 11 languages were declared official languages and given the same status. This was a way of promoting African languages which were neglected in the past. Provinces were free to choose which of the official languages to declare as official languages at regional level (Barkhuizen and Gough, 1996). In the Eastern Cape the official languages are; isiXhosa, Sesotho, English and Afrikaans. These are the dominant languages in the region. IsiXhosa is spoken by 83.8%, Afrikaans 9.6%, English 3.7%, Sesotho 2.2% and others 0.7%. At the University of Fort Hare their language policy aims at elevating and advancing the status of indigenous languages. English and isiXhosa languages have been chosen as the languages of communication and instruction and English has been maintained as the medium of instruction (University of Fort Hare Language Policy).

The Bill of Human Rights (section 31) established the notion of languages as a fundamental human right. It states that:

- i) Every person shall have the right to use the language of his/her choice.
- ii) No person shall be discriminated against on the grounds of language.
- iii) Every person has a right to insist that the state communicate with him/her at national level in the official language of his/her choice (Senate sub-committee on languages, 1995).

### **Critical Evaluation of the Policy**

The vision of the African National Congress (ANC) government of promoting all 11 languages is just a symbolic gesture and is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. The South African government has not yet provided the human resources and physical resources needed to promote multilingualism. Practically speaking, English and Afrikaans still have a higher status than other languages. The value attached to these languages even by blacks themselves, undermines the survival of African languages. The result is that many black South Africans make English their language of choice as a medium of instruction (cf. Dyers 2001; De Klerk 2000 and Banda, 2004). This makes prospects for an African language as an alternative medium of instruction at tertiary institutions appear very bleak, at least in the foreseeable future. The Ministry of Education is aware of this situation and appears not to be doing anything about it.

According to Pandor (2005), the then Minister of Education, stated that English was going to be 'optional' as a medium of instruction, but in the same breath contradicted this position by saying that English was going to remain as the language of education until African languages were sufficiently developed. Furthermore, in 2004, a representative of the Department of Arts and Culture made a presentation at the South African Linguistic Association Conference (SAALA) stating that the government was trying hard to promote the indigenous languages by funding language centres in nine (9) tertiary institutions in South Africa. Clearly, funding of tertiary institutions is not enough because the problem is not with funding, but with the poor teaching of African languages at primary and secondary school levels. The problem also lies with the implementation of government policy.

De Klerk, 2002 argues that the official recognition of English as the language of government and business confirms the power and value attached to English as the lingua franca at government level. In spite of the government policy of multilingualism, English and Afrikaans remain the only two languages used in tertiary institutions. The DoE has not been able to convince tertiary institutions to use one of the indigenous languages as a medium of instruction and the funds for implementing this option are not likely to be available in the near future. Thus, the functional value of English as the medium of instruction is endorsed and students are obliged to adhere to English in order to progress at tertiary level.

Equal opportunity in education is a priority for the government but language in education has not received the attention it deserves. Research has revealed that language and achievement are closely linked and the use of English language as a medium of instruction in South Africa contributes a great deal to the high failure rate and dropout rates among black students (Barry, 1999; Heugh, 2005)). English language proficiency is essential for students who are expected to complete tasks in English and also tasks in other subjects. The former Education Minister (Bengu, 1996) stated that theoretically, students have a right to education in the language of their choice. However, it is argued that the practical implementation of this is not feasible in the foreseeable future since there are no books written in the indigenous languages and there is little enthusiasm among African home language speakers to use indigenous languages as medium of instruction. At present 80% of the South African population choose English as the language of learning and instruction. English as the language of choice of the majority of South African students will result in entrenching unequal opportunities to teaching and learning which will invariably undermine the success of bilingualism (National Department of Education, 1998a).

Moreover, in South Africa, the truth is that English is dominating and the government of South Africa is promoting its use as a language of business, commerce and industry (Ndzimande and Pampallis, 1992). English is regarded as being more important than other indigenous languages. Black parents who send their children to English medium schools also encourage this. At the same time it is clear that the majority of blacks cannot afford this 'luxury' and their children suffer the consequences of not being proficient in English (Mc Donald, 1990).

It is also clear that the preference of English undermines the policy of government to promote equal opportunities in South Africa (Chaka, 1997). In the South African context, black students do not have support structures to develop English language related skills thus putting them at a disadvantage. As indicated earlier, the most disadvantaged group is black students from rural areas. Most students from rural areas have limited English language proficiency and they also lack the exposure of English mother tongue speakers and to television and radio, often experienced by urban students.

However, in 1992, the National Education Policy (National Department of Education, 1992) in South Africa introduced a model where English was phased in with specific subjects over a period of years. Children were expected to begin intensive learning in their own language and the second language (L2) was to be introduced only at grade 4 or 5. The idea was that most cognitive demanding skills be taught in their own language for a longer period of time so that students could benefit from the support of their mother tongue. They could only change to the L2 when they had acquired the necessary language and cognitive skills.

Research suggests that this is not happening as parents demand that their children be taught through the medium of English. Most African children have not been taught in their mother tongue. Instead teachers use different models in class such as code-switching, to make students understand the content which is written in English (Macdonald, 1990; Meyer, 1997). In fact, instead of offering one of the indigenous languages, some schools in the Western Cape, for example, prefer to offer a foreign language.

The new Language Policy post of 1994 supports the democratization of South Africa (Bengu, 1996). It aims at redressing the past linguistic imbalances and encouraging multilingualism. Its ultimate aim is avoiding the continued dominance of English and Afrikaans while ensuring linguistic freedom of choice. Multilingualism is seen as challenging English as the language of power (ANC, 1992). The policy of promoting all 11 languages implies that English should no longer enjoy any special privileges (Botha, 1994). There is little doubt that using English as a language of learning often denies access to better education for black rural students while at the same time maintaining the privileged status. It is for this reason that the South African Language Policy addresses the issues of status, access, equity and empowerment, based on the following principles.

- i) The right for the individual to choose which language or languages to study and to use as a language of learning (medium of instruction).
- ii) The right of the individual to develop linguistic skills, in the language or languages of his/her choice, which are necessary for full participation in national, provincial and local life.
- iii) The necessity to promote and develop South African languages that were previously disadvantaged and neglected (ANC, 1994: 124-134).

The goals of the Language Policy in South Africa are as follows:

- i) To promote national unity.
- ii) To entrench democracy, which includes the protection of language rights?
- iii) To promote multilingualism.
- iv) To promote respect for and tolerance towards linguistic and cultural diversity.
- v) To further the elaboration and modernization of the African languages.
- vi) To promote national economic development (Department of Arts, Culture Science and Technology, 1996: 23).

It is evident that the South African Language Policy outlines a framework for the implementation of Language in Education Policy, which promotes multilingualism. This policy has two goals, namely to encourage the teaching of African Languages at all levels of education and parents' right to choose which language to be used as a medium of instruction. The study undertaken by Meyer (1997) indicates that any decision affecting Language in Education Policy needs to be rooted to the realities on the ground. The importance of decisions pertaining to language policy to be taken at local and regional level must be emphasised, hence, the Pan African Language Board (PANSLAB) has appointed staff members at regional level to attend to all language needs of the provinces. The problem, however, is that it is not clear from the policy whether the aim is individual multilingualism or societal multilingualism.

The government has attempted to use education as the tool to drive and achieve its multilingualism goals. As a result, the Language Plan Task Group (LANTAG) was established in 1995 by the- then Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology to advise him on the development of a comprehensive language plan. According to the group the Language in Education Policy should:

- i) Encourage the educational use of African languages at all levels of education.
- ii) Allow people to choose which language or languages are used as languages of learning and which languages are studied (Meyer, 1997:126).

For more than ten years, very little has been achieved on both objectives, and despite the Minister's move to promote bilingualism in education, this policy remains a symbolic gesture as South Africa is moving towards monolingualism in education. English is being entrenched by the ANC as a language of business, commerce, industry and government at the expense of African languages (Nzimande and Pampallis, 1992; Macdonald, 1990). Members of Parliament use English in parliament and also most government documents are written in English. Business in South Africa is conducted in English and even job interviews are conducted in English. Furthermore, those who are not proficient in English are not likely to get good paying jobs because, as previously mentioned, English is used as the yardstick to measure whether a person is capable of doing the job or not.

Tertiary institutions in South Africa are doing much to promote multilingualism and also to promote indigenous languages. At the University of Fort Hare their policy states that English is the medium of instruction in spite of having 83.8% isiXhosa speakers in the region ( UFH Language Policy). Even the university of Wit Waters Rand has chosen English as the medium of instruction in spite of having most students speaking isiZulu as a township language. IsiZulu has not even been chosen a one of the official languages of the university instead they chose Sesotho because they felt that isZulu was more appropriate in Kwazulu-Natal. Sesotho could not be chosen as a medium of instruction because most students speak it as a dialect. Moreover there are no books written in these African languages which can be used at tertiary level (Foley 2004).

Given the above scenario, it is unacceptable to insist on mother tongue education for African children. It becomes important in South African schools that children should be equipped as early as possible with a good command of English, since that is the language through which their educational performance will be judged. In South Africa, all final examination question papers are either in English or in Afrikaans. Selection for positions in higher education and the job market are based on the achievement of students in the examination (Pandor, 2005). Since the majority of students in grade 12 will be examined in English, English is placed at the centre of language development of all South African children. This situation puts second language students of English at a disadvantage not only because English is not their mother tongue, but also they have little choice with regard to the medium of instruction. This is one of the reasons that African parents are not convinced of the benefits of mother tongue education as they rightly believe that unless socio-economic conditions change, education through the mother tongue will not lead to socio-economic mobility for their children.

Rex, (1989) and Banda, (2004) state that although the National Department of Education is promoting multi/bilingualism, it has not developed programmes and teaching materials to develop African languages. Furthermore, teachers are not trained for working in multilingual classrooms.

One other problem is the revision of syllabi for all languages taught. The syllabi, especially in the Eastern Cape, do not reach the teachers for whom they are intended. Many teachers in the Eastern Cape have not seen nor received the 1995 interim syllabus (National Department of Education, 1997). The syllabus currently in use is dated 1984. Even those who have access to the 1995 syllabus cannot follow it because of large classes, poor resources and facilities, and, in some cases, an inadequate competence in English (Chick and Mwashu, 1992; Murray, 1991). The National Curriculum Statement (2003) also does not put emphasis on academic writing. A further problem is that teachers resist change. Once they are familiar with a particular syllabus they find it difficult to change their teaching practices.

English language testing is another problem facing the Policy. There is no uniformity in measuring academic proficiency as languages are tested as first, second and third languages at higher, standard, and lower grade levels. In order for the Policy to function well the following questions will have to be addressed.

- i) Will language teaching maintain L1-L2 distinction?
- ii) Will testing maintain higher, standard and lower grade distinctions?

- iii) How many languages will students be required to study as subjects?
- iv) Will there be specific language requirements for admission to tertiary education institutions?
- v) Will students be allowed to answer examination questions or other school subjects in the language of their choice as suggested by the ANC (1992)? (Barkhuizen and Gough, 1996).

Some of the questions were addressed by the Minister of Education in the budget speech of May 2005 where the minister stated that English was not going to be a compulsory subject and students would be free to choose any two languages in order to get a certificate for Further Education and Training (FET) (Pandor, 2005). However, this is not going to be feasible in the near future because, as stated earlier, parents want their children to be taught in English as it is perceived as the language of the market and globalization. It is also associated with access to the hierarchically ordered world of employment, status and power (Banda, 2004). Marivate (2005), the former chief executive officer of the PANSLAB does not support parents' views as can be seen in the Daily Dispatch of 21 February 2005 when the chief executive officer said that parents of English second language speakers wanted their children to learn English to the detriment of their culture. The PANSLAB head went on to mention that 78% of South Africans did not have a functional knowledge of English. However, as Banda (2004) has argued, 'culture' sacrifice is a risk most black parents are willing to take in the face of a lack of a viable medium of instruction. African language speakers, out of desperation, want to learn English for instrumental purposes so as to access education, housing and health services. The argument put forth is that the government must decide on how to reach the balance between what black people perceive as effective education for their children, and the promotion of cultural heritage. The government must come up with a strategy to promote and develop all South African languages in all the language aspects and not only promote speaking to the detriment of writing in any language. Therefore, there will be a need for innovation and funds to write and translate books to enable all languages to be used as mediums of instruction.

### ***Conclusion***

To conclude one of the major constraints on the implementation of the Language Policy is the unavailability of resources including human resources, funding, facilities, materials and books. Although the Minister of Education, in her 2005 budget speech (Pandor, 2005), tried to promote indigenous languages, ostensibly by making English a non-compulsory subject, this will not have the desired effect. The Minister of Education admitted this by saying that there were no chances of English being replaced as the main medium of instruction in schools in the near future. Also, there are no books written for content subjects in these indigenous languages and, moreover, it will not be easy to convince parents to change their mindset as the medium of instruction at university is still English. To try to implement what the Minister suggested, academics should start writing books in these indigenous languages. To address these problems a well-formulated plan of action should be designed (Barkhuizen and Gough, 1996). To address the issue of promoting indigenous languages all the government departments must have a language unit where interpreters, and translators can be trained in order to provide service to those who do not understand English. All government documents must be translated to the indigenous languages and that would also enhance service delivery. Also there must be awareness campaigns to educate people on the importance of knowing ones language in order to preserve the culture of black people to in South Africa. The Minister of Higher Education has provided certain universities in South Africa with funds to promote and develop indigenous Languages. To address the issue the University of Fort Hare is offering conversational IsiXhosa to all the lecturers who are not able to speak it. Furthermore, all the tutors that are employed at UFH must be able to speak isiXhosa so that they can be able to explain concepts in the first language of the student. There is also a lexicography unit that is responsible for developing new terminology in isiXhosa. But, there is still a lot that needs to be done in order to develop the indigenous languages for them to be used as medium of instruction.

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