



Language in Education: *Learning in the mother tongue*

"Only slaves and the children of immigrants gave/give up their language(s). No state has ever become economically powerful through the medium of a second language alone. It is a myth that only 'monolingual' countries have been economically successful."

- Dr Neville Alexander

1. Introduction

According to a 2010 Department of Basic Education (DBE) report, in 2007 25% of school children in South Africa spoke isiZulu as a home language; 20% used isiXhosa; 10% used Afrikaans and 7% used English. However, in 2007 the majority of the children (65%) in the schooling system learnt through the medium of English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT). The second most common LOLT was Afrikaans (12%).¹

These statistics are hard to fathom if one considers that the Constitution of South Africa makes provision for eleven official languages, and that Section 29(2) of the Bill of Rights states that children have the right to be taught in the language of their choice where it is practical to do so. Furthermore, the 1997 Language in Education Policy (LiEP) is underpinned by a principle of maintaining the use of the home language of the learners as the LOLT in the classroom, especially in the early years of learning, while providing access to additional language (also called additive bilingualism).

This briefing paper, which draws on the recent a roundtable hosted by CPLO, will briefly highlight the issues associated with mother-tongue education and will consider to what extent the Language in Education Policy gives effect to the spirit of the Constitution.

2. Language policy in schools

2.1 Language in education policy

The 1997 Language in Education Policy (LiEP) promotes an additive bilingual/multilingual approach in which the home language or mother tongue of the learner is maintained while the other languages are added to the learner's linguistic repertoire. While the LiEP obligates the state "to pursue the language policy most supportive of general conceptual growth amongst learners, and hence to establish additive multilingualism as an approach to language in education" it does not prescribe the route a school should take. The LiEP makes provision for the school communities to decide which of the eleven official languages to offer as the LoLT and subject. Section 6 of the South African School Act (SASA) empowers the school community, through the school governing body, to determine the language policy of the school². Thus, the LoLT provided by a school depends to a large extent on the choices made by learners, and especially parents, and the LiEP, read together with the Schools Act, places the emphasis on *choice*, rather than strong state intervention, as a basis for determining the policy pertaining to the LoLT in schools. Ironically, the fact that the LoLT selection is a *choice* inadvertently hampers the realisation of the true intentions of LiEP – that of mother tongue-based education. Parents of African first-language learners often choose

English as the preferred LoLT because of the perceived status of English as the language of upward mobility; the language that is needed for the job market.

While the LiEP was widely applauded, not much has been done to implement it. Only in 2001, 4 years after the tabling of the LiEP, did the education ministry release a draft implementation plan, with a budget, timeframes for teacher training and the development of educational materials. However, the plan was shelved because it fell short of the additive multilingual intentions of the LiEP. When Naledi Pandor took over as education minister in 2006 she announced her intention to pilot mother tongue-based education to Grade 7 and to draw up an action plan – however, her good intentions never materialised. The plan encouraged the promotion of a six year mother tongue-based education programme aimed at using a learner's home language as the LoLT in the foundation and intermediate phases. This intervention would have been welcomed as it is supported by bilingual education research that shows that teaching and learning should proceed in the home language at least for the first six to eight years of schooling before a successful switch to a second language as the sole LoLT becomes possible³. This can only happen if the second language has been successfully learnt from the start as well. For example, an isiXhosa learner would have isiXhosa as the LoLT (and not only as a subject) from Grade R to Grade 6, and perhaps English as the first additional language.

2.2 The National Curriculum Statement

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) introduced some elements of the LiEP by promoting the use of the home language as the LoLT for the Foundation Phase (Grade R- 3). According to the DBE, in 2007 almost 80% of the Foundation Phase learners had their home language as their LoLT. While this sounds encouraging it must be remembered that this figure also include those who have English and Afrikaans as their home languages, thus the percentage of those who have a home language other than English and Afrikaans as their LoLT is significantly lower. Also, the preferred LoLT of learners after Grade 3 is either English or Afrikaans. Those learners, who suddenly switched from a LoLT in their mother tongue, find themselves having to learn in an unfamiliar language. This in itself would not have been such

a challenge if learners had exposure to the additional language (either English or Afrikaans) from Grade R; however learners were often exposed to English at a much later stage. This sudden switch, and the problems it causes, could well be a contributing factor in the dismal Annual National Assessment results for Grade 3.

2.3 The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement

The Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), introduced in Grade R to 3 in 2012 (Grade 4 to 6 will be introduced in 2013) seems to have done both a service and a disservice for the promotion of mother tongue-based education – especially additive bilingualism as espoused in the LiEP. CAPS allow for a home language and a first additional language, as subjects, from Grade 1. Here the assumption is that for most learners with a home language other than English and Afrikaans, the first additional language would in most cases be English – thus an earlier interaction with English than previously under the NCS. However, CAPS does not allow for a second additional language (as before). It prescribes how many hours are to be spent teaching the home language and first additional language in the various grades, but with no time allocations for a second additional language. If schools opt to offer a second additional language, the teaching will have to take place after school. This means that some schools, such as those in the Western Cape, that offer English and Afrikaans, may not offer isiXhosa as a subject. Recently⁴, it was reported that some schools in KwaZulu-Natal, where the majority of schools have English as the home language, are considering dropping isiZulu in favour of Afrikaans as the first additional language. Some educationalists argue that most pupils opted for Afrikaans as the first additional language because it is easier to learn than isiZulu. However, according to the KZN Education Department, while more Grade 12 pupils wrote Afrikaans than isiZulu (as a first or additional language) in the 2011 matric exams, almost 100% of the isiZulu pupils passed the exams compared to the 70% who wrote Afrikaans.

3. The Benefits of mother-tongue or additive multilingual education

In 1953 the UNESCO Committee Report on Mother Tongue Education, stated⁵:

“It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.”

It is through language that children encounter the world and make sense of the input they receive in the classroom. It is through language that they decode the messages from their teachers and written texts; and it is through language that they express their understanding of these inputs. It is when the child experiences these inputs in their own language, the language they use at home, that they are able to better express themselves. Conversely, it is when the child learns in a language that is not familiar, and this unfamiliar language is used by a teacher who is not adequately proficient in it that language, that the language becomes a barrier to learning.

There is not only a large body of studies in other African countries such as Ethiopia and Nigeria to attest to the benefits of mother tongue-based education, but also some South African significant local studies. In 2006 the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) introduced their Language Transformation Plan which would encouraged the use of mother tongue-based education for the first six years, and that all learners should, by Grade 9, have learnt an African language, other than Afrikaans. Assessments would also be done in the mother tongue. The ambitious plan was piloted, with the assistance of PRAESA and the Faculty of Education at the University of the Western Cape, in 16 schools across the Western Cape. While the initial results were promising – isiXhosa mother tongue speakers showed a significant increase in test results for content subjects and mathematics - the subsequent provincial administration decided to end the project⁶ and the pilot schools were informed that they may no longer write their Annual National Assessments in isiXhosa. In other similar studies across South Africa, it was found that where the learner takes the test in their home language (and where the home language is the same as the LoLT) their scores were on average 25% higher than those learners for whom the LoLT was different from their home language⁷. Of course, while this may point to language usage, other factors such as home

environment, teaching quality, etc. may also play a role.

4. Challenges

If the benefits of mother tongue-based education – even if it is only for the first six to seven years - is so well-documented, why is there an inability or reluctance on the part of the state to implement a programme, such as that proposed by Ms Pandor in 2006? There are a multitude of reasons, but three stand out prominently.

4.1 Perception

A line in CS Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*: “What you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing” perhaps best describes the attitudes of parents and learners towards the official South African languages other than English and Afrikaans. From where they stand, being proficient in English (and to a lesser extent Afrikaans) seems to be the key to unlock the doors to a job, to a university degree, and to a life outside the townships. They believe their own language is not as ‘developed’ as English, and would rather opt for a school where English is the language of learning and teaching. The late Dr Neville Alexander argued that parents believe this because of South Africa’s history, in which mother tongue education was rejected because “of the stigma of Bantu Education, with its racist inferior curriculum and the historical rejection of Afrikaans in favour of English⁸.”

It will take some time, perhaps another generation, to change these attitudes, but many argue that there is something that can be done almost immediately – prescribe mother tongue education, alongside English as an additional language, for the first six or seven years of schooling.

4.2 Lack of African language teaching resources and teaching capacity

To implement a programme such as that mentioned above will require the requisite teaching materials and human resources. In this regard most universities have been doing some wonderful work in developing teaching resources in language such as isiXhosa and isiZulu, as well as training teachers to teach in other languages. The DBE has also indicated that it is planning a Language Unit that will be responsible, amongst

others, for the development of relevant African language terminology for all content subjects.

These are welcomed developments, but ones that will require huge financial commitment from the state.

4.3 Lack of political will

Nothing can and will happen if there is no political will, i.e. a willingness on the part of the political powers to translate the lip-service they tend to give to the nine indigenous official languages into practical programmes for the promotion of these languages. It is a sad indictment on the state that it had to be forced, by an order of the court⁹, to uphold Section 6 of the Constitution by ensuring that it recognises all eleven official languages when communicating government business. Parliament finally adopted the language bill in August 2012 that promotes for the equitable use of all the official languages. It is hoped that, as a positive spin-off from the bill, the government will be willing to implement those interventions that have been shown to be successful, such as the WCED Language Transformation Plan.

5. Conclusion

Mother tongue-based education is not a panacea for our education-related ills. However, moving beyond English and Afrikaans as the languages of learning and teaching is indeed possible and desirable. Developing the necessary teaching resources and human resources is key, and finding the political will is the catalyst that will ensure all South Africans will be proud to express themselves in the tongue they first heard at their mother's knee.

Furthermore, moving beyond English and Afrikaans as the languages of learning and teaching should not be mere option – it is an obligation, and one which will go some way to ensuring South Africa will finally be able to showcase the true potential of all its learners – from Grade 1 to matric.

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¹ Department of Basic Education (2010): *The Status of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) in schools. A Quantitative Overview*

² RSA: *South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996.*

³ Peter Plüddemann (2010): *Language in Education: what the Department thinks in 2010.* Leap News No. 28. December 2010.

⁴ Wendy Jasson da Costa & Leanne Jansen (2012): *Afrikaans vs Zulu row brewing at schools.* IOL News. October 22 2012. Available online <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/kwazulu-natal/afrikaans-vs-zulu-row-brewing-at-schools-1.1407943#.UIUZaWdRDzp>

⁵ Zubeida Khatoom Desai (2012): *A case for mother tongue education?* Thesis submitted for Phd. Faculty of Education, UWC. Available online http://etd.uwc.ac.za/usrfiles/modules/etd/docs/etd_gen8Srv25Nme4_2093_1333026901.pdf

⁶ Peter Plüddemann (2012): *CPLO roundtable discussion: Language in Education – moving beyond just English and Afrikaans.*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Neville Alexander (2010): *Mother tongue-based bilingual education: provincially, nationally and internationally.* Leap News No. 28. December 2010

⁹ In 2009, Cerneels Lourens made an application to court that the government was in violation of the Constitution by failing to promulgate the South African Languages Bill. In the case (Lourens v The President of SA and others, 2009), he sought an order compelling the government to finalise and promulgate national legislation to regulate and monitor the use of all eleven official languages.