South Africa

The impact of language policy and practice on children’s learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa

2017
2.15 South Africa

2.15.1 Background Information
Following centuries of occupation by the Dutch, French, and British, South Africa became a republic in 1961. English and Afrikaans were designated the official languages.

One of the more damaging pieces of language policy under colonial rule, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 reinforced apartheid through the education system by segregating educational facilities by race. Schools reserved for the country’s white children were of Western standards, while schools designated for the other ethnic communities of South Africa were of much lower quality. The act was in force until being repealed in 1979.

In 1994 South Africa held its first universal elections, amid a national movement that ended apartheid and ushered in an era of growing inclusiveness. This inclusiveness is reflected in the establishment of 11 languages as official languages.

Kamwangamalu (2004) notes that “the change from apartheid to democracy brought about the official recognition that South Africa is a multilingual rather than the bilingual country it had been assumed to be in the apartheid era. This recognition has translated into a new, multilingual language policy” (p.407).

Ethnologue lists 31 languages for South Africa.

2.15.2. Current language policy
When the apartheid era ended, South Africa implemented one of the most inclusive language policies on the African continent. Kamwangamalu (2004) says that the new language policy spelled out in the 1996 Constitution, “accords official status to 11 languages: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, isiSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.... All official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and be treated equitably” (p. 245).

This policy is rooted in the desire to overcome past policies of marginalization and discrimination, including the Bantu Education Act (Heugh, 2012). Kamwangamalu points out that the Constitution is explicit in “recognizing the historical diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people” (2004, p. 246) and places an obligation on the state to “take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages” (2004, p.246). Kamwangamalu notes that the language-in- education policy aims to promote additive multilingualism, develop all of the official languages, and decrease the disadvantages resulting from the mismatch between languages spoken in the home and languages used in school.

2.15.3. Education policy and practice
According to the current Language in Education Policy (LIEP, Government of South Africa 1997), “the right to choose the language of learning and teaching is vested in the individual” (p.1), though the choice must be made among the 11 official languages. The policy further states:

“The learner must choose the language of teaching upon application for admission to a particular school. Where a school uses the language chosen by the learner, and where there is a place available in the relevant grade, the school must admit the learner” (p. 3).

If students in a given grade, such as 40 students in Grades 1 to 6, or 35 students in Grades 7 to 12 request a particular language of instruction, the school should provide it (p.3).

This language policy statement provides policy space for extensive mother tongue- based learning; however it also leaves space for parents and teachers to choose English as medium of instruction rather than any of the mother tongues. Manyike (2013) notes that the “general practice in black schools is the use of the L1 in Grades 1 to 3 with English introduced as the additional language in Grade 1 or 2. Grade 4 marks a transition to English as the [language of teaching and learning] for the entire primary curriculum” (p. 188).
Heugh argues that this practice actually means that, for the 78 per cent of students with African home languages, the switch to English after three years is a switch to a foreign language-medium instruction. For English-speaking children, though, the policy allows them to use their mother tongue throughout their education (Heugh, 2011, p. 53).

Taylor and Coetzee, however, analysing data from the Department of Basic Education’s Annual Surveys of Schools from 2007 to 2011, found that 79.8 per cent of children were in schools that experienced no change in [language of instruction] policy during the period. In contrast, 5.9 per cent of children were in schools that switched to English as the language of instruction, and 14.3 per cent of children were in schools that switched from English to an African language during the period (Taylor and Coetzee 2013, p.11).

Kruger (2009, pp. 36-7 attributes the practice of choosing English to parents’ lack of trust in an African language as medium of instruction, the influence of globalization, and a persistent post-apartheid hesitation to use local languages in education. Alexander (2003) believes that this enthusiasm for English is rooted in the “simplistic and inarticulate belief that if only all the people of the country could rapidly acquire a knowledge of the English language, all communication problems and, therefore, inter-group tensions, will disappear” (Alexander, 2003, p. 16).

Motala (2013) concurs that this gap between policy intent and implementation has a damaging impact on student learning. He notes that “inadequate mastery of the language of learning and teaching is a major factor in the abysmally low levels of learner achievement; yet many parents prefer (with their children’s concurrence) to have their children taught in the second language of English by teachers who are themselves second language speakers of English” (p. 200).

Across the nation, the issue remains contentious.1 The Government of South Africa has recently taken steps to counter the choice of English only in the classroom, by means of a policy amendment requiring the learning and use of some African language in every classroom. The choice of African language will be informed by the local context.2

One exception to this generally challenging picture is the work of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). With technical assistance from the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA; see below), in 2007 the WCED developed a Language Transformation Plan.3 The plan promotes six years of mother tongue-based bilingual education and aims at learners gaining basic conversational fluency in the mother tongue (Xhosa), English and Afrikaans (Bloch, Guzula and Nkence, 2010, p. 89).

2.15.4. Studies
The Department of Basic Education (DBE) is carrying out early grade reading assessment (EGRA) studies in Northwest and Mpumalanga Provinces. The DBE 2017-2018 Annual Performance Plan notes that “EGRA intends to solidify learners’ reading proficiency in their home languages so that they will be able to transfer those skills when they transit to use English as a language of learning and teaching in the Intermediate Phase and beyond” (DBE 2017-2018 Annual Performance Plan, p. 38).4

A significant study of language and learning, called Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa (LOITASA), was carried out from 2002 to 2011 with funding from the Norwegian University Fund. In South Africa, the research was carried out through the University of the Western Cape and the University of Oslo; it compared learning in isiXhosa-medium classrooms with learning in English medium classrooms. Additional components of LOITASA involved staff development and teacher capacity building. LOITASA has been extensively documented.5

2. Email communication from Saadhna Panday, UNICEF South Africa, 19 May 2015.
Manyike (2013) carried out a quantitative study of the effects of the national language-in-education policy on the first and secondary language proficiency of Grade 7 learners in township schools in Gauteng Province. The study assessed the reading and writing performance of Xitsonga-speaking learners in Xitsonga and English. This is the most recent in a series of studies on the subject by Manyike and colleagues.

Taylor and Coetzee (Taylor and Coetzee 2013) examined longitudinal data on school characteristics, including language of instruction by grade, and student test score data for the population of South African primary schools. One of the findings of this study was that mother tongue instruction in the early grades significantly improves English acquisition as measured in Grades 4 to 6.

A three-year study carried out in the 1980s, called The Threshold Project (MacDonald 1990), examined the nature of the language and learning difficulties experienced by Sepedi-speaking Grade 5 children when they transitioned from their mother tongue to English.
2.15.5. Language education initiatives

**PRAESA**
The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA)\(^6\) is an independent research and development unit affiliated with the University of Cape Town. Established by Neville Alexander in 1992, PRAESA’s work has included language planning and policy formulation, in-service teacher education, research, initiating and supporting reading clubs, and materials development (Trudell, Dowd, Piper and Bloch, 2012, p. 16). In 2012, PRAESA began a new phase characterized by a focus on biliteracy development; the organization began a national reading-for-enjoyment campaign called Nal’ibali,\(^7\) in partnership with Times Media, and supported by the DG Murray Trust.

**Magic Classroom Collective**
Through support from UNICEF, via the Schools for Africa partnership, the Nelson Mandela Institute of Rural Education (NMI) has been carrying out research and support for bilingual learning since 2008 through an initiative called the Magic Classroom Collective.\(^8\) The initiative aims at supporting teachers to apply mother tongue-based bilingual approaches to literacy and numeracy development and to provide tested tools to strengthen the child’s home language learning and English acquisition.\(^9\) The programme is currently operating in 17 schools, in three isiXhosa-speaking communities of Eastern Cape.

**Molteno Institute**
The Molteno Institute for Language and Literacy\(^10\) carries out African-language reading materials development in South Africa as well as a number of other African countries, in collaboration with a range of partners. The Molteno Institute was founded in 1974. It is based at Rhodes University and funded by a grant from the Molteno Brothers Trust. Today, Molteno produces materials in many South African languages through its program Breakthrough to Literacy; it also offers a Bridge to English programme.

In 2012, the Molteno Institute developed a technology-based early literacy programme, called Bridges to the Future, in partnership with the International Literacy Institute at the University of Pennsylvania and Trydian Interactive and funded by the All Children Reading Grand Challenge. The Bridges to the Future Initiative is an interactive approach to literacy learning available in four languages: Sepedi, Tshivenda, Xitsonga and English.

---

Room to Read

Room to Read’s Reading and Writing Instruction (RWI) programme has been carried out since 2012, in 50 schools of Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces. RWI is a two-year, school-based intervention that aims to strengthen the teaching and learning of reading and writing in the early primary grades where Sepedi is the language of instruction. The programme includes baseline and endline assessments of reading competencies (Cooper, Rigole and Jukes, 2014).

Integrated Education Program

The Integrated Education Program (IEP) ran from 2004-2009, led by RTI and funded by USAID. One component of the IEP was the use of EGRA for baseline and endline assessments of reading skills, carried out in English, isiXhosa, IsiZulu, Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga.

Near the end of IEP, a literacy intervention called Systematic Method for Reading Success (SMRS) was implemented as a short-term boost to reading achievement. The SMRS is designed for use in local languages and with teachers who have not been trained to teach reading. The 3-month implementation of SMRS took place in early 2009, in three provinces and using the isiZulu, Sepedi, and Setswana languages. The implementers were very surprised to find that in all three provinces, the classrooms were not sufficiently monolingual for the SMRS to work optimally. Both teachers and learners spoke languages other than those local to the provinces.

Six-Year Biliteracy Project (SYBP)

From 1998-2003, a Six-Year Biliteracy Project (SYBP; Alexander, 2006) was carried out in Cape Town. The SYBP aimed to raise the status of isiXhosa in the classroom and to demonstrate that reading and writing can be acquired simultaneously in two languages under appropriate conditions. The project demonstrated that political will, strong teacher training and parental involvement are all crucial to success.