4.2. South Africa

4.2.1. Background and current status

The language ecology in South Africa is dynamic and highly complex. The roles of local languages, Afrikaans and English in education and society are multifaceted and full of political implications.

When South Africa gained independence from European powers in 1961, its language policy made English and Afrikaans the official languages - the latter an informal derivative of Dutch that had developed into a language of education, commerce and governance. Throughout the years of apartheid, the use of Afrikaans and English symbolized the power dynamics among the South African descendants of European settlers. As Kamwangamalu (2004) puts it:

“Language planning has historically been an arena for struggle, where the white segment of the country’s population has sought to exercise power over other ethnic groups...[in this case] through control of language. It has been so because, decisions about language often led to benefits for some and loss of privilege, status and rights for others.” (p. 207)

One prominent illustration of this power dynamic was the Bantu Education Act that mandated mother tongue-medium education across the nation (Heugh, 2012). This policy benefited the resource-rich English and Afrikaans speaking school populations, to the detriment of the rest of the nation’s students. Thus this policy was very badly received by teachers and parents in the Black Homelands, where few or no educational resources existed in the language of the community (Eriksson, 2014, p. 7).

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.” The current Constitution of South Africa gives official status to nine indigenous languages as well as Afrikaans and English. To support the policy and language planning, the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) was formed; this independent body was given the mandate to advise central and provincial government on language policy and language use (Manyike and Lemmer, 2014).

Thus, the typical practice in South African schools is to use the mother tongue through Grade 3 and then switch to English. Manyike (2013) notes that “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 LoLT [language of teaching and learning] for the entire primary curriculum” (p. 188).

Heugh, who has written extensively on this subject, argues that this practice means that the “78 per cent of students who have African home languages switch to English after three years while, ironically, English and Afrikaans speakers continue to benefit from mother tongue medium education as they did during the colonial and apartheid eras” (Heugh, 2011, p. 53).

An additional feature of South African language policy is that individuals and communities have the right to choose the language of instruction for their children (Government of South Africa, 1997). While this policy has the advantage of providing space for extensive mother tongue-based learning, it also allows for the choice of English over any of the mother tongues. This choice is being made more and more frequently.

94 Interestingly, Heugh (2000) notes that “despite the cognitively impoverished curriculum, eight years of mother tongue instruction gave pupils time to learn their own language and to learn a second and a third language sufficiently well to make the switch in medium of instruction in the ninth year. During the first phase of Bantu Education, 1953–1976, the matriculation results improved, despite the poor curriculum” (p. 24).
Motala (2013) 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).

The National Education Evaluation and Development Unit’s (NEEDU) 2012 national report on early grade literacy teaching and learning (NEEDU, 2013) provides further evidence of the damage being done to education outcomes by the move to English. The report points to high language diversity in the communities, reflecting a high rate of migration into these communities; this is resulting in a mismatch between the language of instruction and the home language for many South African students. In a policy environment that allows learners and communities to choose their language of instruction, the choices being made are generally favouring English over local languages.

The report concludes that “the question of a LoLT [language of learning and teaching] that is not the HL [home language] has forced itself onto the agenda, and has become a significant educational reality in schools” (NEEDU, 2013, p. 34). Further, the report states that “if the country is serious about mother tongue instruction in the first three grades, then the African languages need to be standardized and a full set of reading materials for the FP [Grades 1 to 3] developed in each [subject]. This is a major undertaking, but the present laissez faire approach is exacerbating the problem” (p. 36). A study by Heugh and Prinsloo (2013) in rural Limpopo Province also indicates that learners’ home languages are being abandoned in favour of English. Where this move is not accompanied by strong English fluency, learning achievement invariably suffers.

4.2.2. Evidence on language and learning in South Africa

Due to the high political profile of language policy and practice in South Africa, as well as the work of a number of South African language scholars and research-oriented institutions, a number of important studies on language and learning have been carried out. Several of these are long-term language education initiatives with multiple emphases on research, evidence-based advocacy and capacity building. Two of the best known are the Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa (LOITASA) project and the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA).

Herman (2009) argues that LOITASA findings in classrooms of isiXhosa-speaking communities helped to provide the evidence to support the development of the Language Transformation Plan by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). Developed with technical assistance from PRAESA,95 the plan promotes six years of mother tongue-based bilingual education, and aims to help learners gain basic conversational fluency in the mother tongue (isiXhosa), English and Afrikaans (Bloch, Guzula and Nkence, 2010, p. 89).

University of South Africa scholars T.V. Manyike and E.M. Lemmer have published an extensive review of language-in-education research (Manyike and Lemmer, 2014). They note that research done between 15 and 30 years ago was already showing strong evidence that South African children taught in a language other than their home language were not succeeding in school (Molteno Project 2000; MacDonald 1990). After reviewing more recent research findings, the authors conclude that the conditions for home language (HL) literacy acquisition in primary schools remain dismal: “[t]he majority of learners whose HL is not the medium of instruction continue to experience academic underachievement as HL education is largely ignored by the education authorities in spite of rhetoric to the contrary” (p. 256).

A series of articles by Manyike and Lemmer, published between 2008 and 2013, examine the development of Grade 7 students’ learning ability in Xitsonga (the mother tongue) and English. In the most recent publication of the series, Manyike (2013) describes a quantitative study of the reading and writing performance of Xitsonga-speaking Grade 7 learners in Xitsonga and English. Manyike found the students’ reading and writing performance to be equally substandard in both languages. Manyike concludes that these outcomes can be attributed to “short-term exposure to schooling in L1 [first, mother tongue or home language] and low levels of exposure to English outside the classroom” (p. 187).

The LOITASA project, mentioned above, was carried out from 2002 to 2011 with funding from the Norwegian University Fund. In South Africa, the research was carried out by the University of the Western Cape and the University of Oslo; its focus was a comparison of learning in isiXhosa and in English, using experimental isiXhosa classrooms and control English medium classrooms. The findings reinforce the argument that learning in the child’s own language results in better achievement than does learning in a language the child has not mastered.

Taylor and Coetzee (2013) examined the impact of transitional bilingual education programmes and English immersion programmes on student learning outcomes, particularly focusing on their acquisition of English. The study combined several datasets covering 2007 to 2012, more than 800,000 students in more than 9000 schools. It was found that mother tongue medium instruction in Grades 1 to 3 significantly improves English acquisition as measured in Grades 4 to 6.

A study by Vorster, Mayet and Taylor (2012) uses a nationally representative dataset to estimate the impact of writing a test in English versus writing that same test in the mother tongue. This study examines two sets of test scores for the same (Grade 3) children, taking the same test, administered in English on one occasion and in the mother tongue on the other. A comparison of the two sets of scores indicates that the children’s performance was significantly higher in their home language than in English.

A three-year study carried out in the 1980s, called The Threshold Project (MacDonald, 1990), examined the nature of the language and learning difficulties that Sepedi-speaking Grade 5 children in South Africa experienced when they transitioned from their mother tongue to English. The study found that these children were ill-prepared for the sudden transition of medium of instruction, with insufficient English vocabulary for learning in the ten content subjects. MacDonald maintained that attaining strong literacy skills in the mother tongue first is essential for this transition of language of instruction. Manyike and Lemmer (2014, p. 253) consider that this apartheid-era study is still highly relevant to language policy and practice in South Africa today.

Other international studies that do not specifically focus on language of instruction also indicate poor student learning outcomes in South Africa.

- The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) study of 2006 assessed reading literacy at Grade 4 level in the eleven official languages of South Africa, and at Grade 5 level in Afrikaans or English. South African children generally achieved well below the international average, despite the fact that most participants wrote the test in their home language; learners tested in Sepedi and Tshivenda were especially low. Surprisingly, language of instruction practices were not mentioned as a factor in the outcomes (Manyike and Lemmer, 2014, p. 255).

- A 2007 evaluation of SACMEQ data for South Africa by Stellenbosch University scholar Nic Spaull, indicates that 29 per cent of Grade 6-age children in South Africa are either not in school, or are functionally illiterate (Table 3.3).

The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) study of 2011 in 42 countries, including South Africa. Typically given to Grade 8 students, in South Africa TIMSS testing was done on Grade 9 students. Even so, South Africa scored among the bottom six countries in both mathematics and science.

Such studies serve as a reminder that strong learning outcomes depend on strong infrastructures and systems, including but not limited to pro-mother tongue language policy implementation.

Heugh (2011; 2012) and others have argued (e.g. DBE, 2010) that the language and education policy in South Africa will only be effective when it is better integrated with the national curriculum, so that language of instruction is treated as one of several components of quality education. This perspective is supported by a number of NGO education programs that combine attention to the language of instruction with focus on teacher capacity and support, second language learning, materials development, parent involvement, and other aspects of quality education.

4.2.3. Issues and challenges

Several issues arise from the South African language dynamic.

Multiple languages in school and society
Where in-country migration is so prevalent, language is often not central to the cultural and social identity of a population. Unlike the majority of African language communities, for whom cultural identity is linked closely to one primary language, many communities in South Africa appear to be increasingly identified through social and economic features that do not include language. Stroud has written extensively on this topic from a South African perspective (Stroud, 2003; Stroud and Heugh, 2004).

The pedagogical implications of multiple languages in school and society relate to the difficulty in predicting or choosing classroom language of instruction. Where multiple home languages form the school linguistic environment, a combination of home language support and well-structured English language acquisition may be needed to achieve strong student learning outcomes. Such an English-focused approach to language pedagogy must be well supported and resourced; simply allowing parental choice to dictate English medium classroom teaching is far from adequate.

The drive to English medium instruction

It is important to maintain an appropriate role for English. The global dominance of English has generated a number of myths buttressing the value of English in both local contexts and the national language ecology. Yet the strong community and parental desire for English-medium instruction, described by Heugh, Motala and others, is likely to be a significant contributing factor to the poor education quality described by the NEEDU, SACMEQ, TIMSS and PIRLS data above. Significant commitment to advocacy and awareness-raising regarding language and learning seems crucial in this context.

Transition from local language medium to English in primary school

The common practice in South Africa appears to be the use of local languages through Grade 3, with a transition to English in Grade 4. This is a common policy choice across Africa. However South Africa has a large number of citizens who speak English either as a mother tongue or else a strong second language. Children from such households are essentially receiving mother tongue education throughout their school years, while grade 4 children from homes where indigenous languages are the norm experience the cognitive and academic shock of moving from a language they master to one that they do not. The rush to English in lower grades, described above, only widens the learning gap, since it further decreases the child’s learning time in a language he or she speaks.

In this environment, equity in education would surely require substantial government support for mother tongue education through grades higher than Grade 3, support that would help to level the playing field for children and communities whose language proficiencies do not include English.