

## Arguments For and Against the Use of Indigenous African Languages in South African Schools

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**ABSTRACT** The continued use of European languages in African classrooms has been labeled by some as 'linguistic imperialism' in the literature. Questionable arguments have been advanced to justify the official neglect of indigenous African languages in education, but the reality is that such arguments are no longer valid. Efforts by some African governments to remedy the situation have been mediocre at best. For instance, South Africa has 11 official languages but English and Afrikaans remain the *de facto* mediums of instruction in schools. No significant efforts are being made to develop and encourage the use of indigenous African languages in schools. In addition, Departments of African languages are being scaled down in South African universities, and the colleges of Education which were at the forefront of teaching these languages have been closed down. This paper attempts to look at the challenges and prospects of making the concept of 11 official languages a reality in South Africa classrooms.

### THE LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION SITUATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The debate about language in education is not a new one in South Africa. A case in point is what has become known as the Soweto Uprising of 1976. It was precisely a revolt against the imposition of Afrikaans as the sole medium of instruction in Black South African schools.

The new political dispensation in South Africa has sought to address the issue, hence, a new language policy which is outlined in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 (pp.4 - 5)* as follows:

1. The official languages are in alphabetical order, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda and XiTsonga.
2. The onus is on the state to create conditions for the development and promotion of particularly the nine African languages.
3. The national and provincial governments must use at least two official languages for the purposes of government.
4. National and provincial governments must regulate and monitor the use of official languages. All official languages must be treated equitably.
5. A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must:

a) promote, and create conditions for the development and use of:

- (i) all official languages
- (ii) the Khoi, Nama, and San languages; and
- (iii) sign language and

b) promote and ensure respect for:

- (i) all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu, and Urdu; and Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.

According to Desai and van der Merwe (1998: 246) the new language policy outlined above, does provide a constitutional framework for building a more multilingual public consciousness and practice. The question is, is this really happening?

According to <http://www.southafrica.info/about/people/language.htm> the population of the speakers of the 11 official languages are as follows.

Afrikaans: (13.3%)  
English: (8.2%)  
isiNdebele: (1.6%)  
isiXhosa: (17.6%)  
isiZulu: (23.8%)  
Sepedi: (9.4%)  
Sesotho: (7.9%)  
Setswana: (6.2%)

siSwati: (2.7%)  
Tshivenda: (2.3%)  
Xitsonga: (4.4%)

The researchers have used this data to buttress our argument that resources cannot be distributed equitably in a situation where one language has millions of speakers and another has only hundreds of speakers. It must, however, be noted that some of the African languages named here are spoken outside South Africa (for example, Sesotho in Lesotho, Setswana in Botswana, siSwati in Swaziland and isiNdebele in Zimbabwe) so their use in South Africa will go a long way in easing communication and promoting unity amongst Southern Africans. This is very important considering the recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa. In addition, the cost of developing these languages can also be shared with the countries in which they are spoken. The focus of the paper is on language in education, so we now turn our attention to the following relevant documents:

- Draft *Language in Education Policy* published in terms of Section 3(4)(m) of the *National Education Policy Act, 1996* (Act 27 of 1996) (Department of Education 1997k) and
- *Norms and Standards Regarding Language Policy* published in terms of Section 6(1) of the *South African Schools Act, 1996* (Department of Education 1996e).

Desai and van der Merwe (1998: 250) and Wright (2012) are of the view that historically, language in education policy in South Africa has two components: language as medium of instruction and language as subject. With regard to language as medium of instruction, the documents state that 'The right to choose a language of teaching is vested in the individual. This right has, however, to be exercised within the overall framework of the obligation of the education system to promote multilingualism' (Department of Education 2002, 2003). In other words, learners have to choose a language as medium of instruction from the eleven official languages. This is however dependant on the number of learners making the choice that is, there should be at least 45 learners in a particular grade. And then there is the issue of the cost of such a move in both human and material terms.

The following recommendations apply in so far as language as subject is concerned:

- All learners shall choose at least one approved language as a subject in Grade 1 and 2.
- All learners shall choose at least two approved languages, of which at least one shall be an official language, from Grade 3 onwards.
- All language subjects shall receive equitable time and resource allocation.
- The following promotion requirements apply to language subjects:
  - In Grade 1 to Grade 4 promotion is based on performance in one language and Mathematics.
  - From Grade 5 onwards, one language must be passed.
  - From Grade 10 to 12 two languages must be passed, one at first language level, and the other on at least second language level. At least one of these languages must be an official language.
  - Subject to national norms and standards as determined by the Minister of Education, the level of achievement for promotion shall be determined by the provincial education departments.

#### **Arguments For and Against the Continued Use of Non-indigenous Languages in (South) Africa**

In spite of the constitutional stipulations indicated and discussed above, Afrikaans and English remain the preferred languages used as medium of instruction especially across the spectrum of higher education in South Africa. It must however be pointed out that for obvious historical reasons, Afrikaans does not enjoy the same acceptance as English. In fact, the continued use of non-indigenous African languages in African schools has been labeled by some Africans as 'linguistics imperialism'. We now highlight some of the arguments used in the literature to justify the continued use of non-indigenous languages in African schools and how these arguments may apply to the South African context.

- non-indigenous African languages serve as a unifying factor. That is, South Africa has more than nine indigenous languages and they are not all mutually intelligible so a neutral language will easily be acceptable by all.

- indigenous South African languages may be deficient in scientific and technological terminology.
- English is a universally well-known and accepted language so why bother to change it.
- The cost factor that is, so much money (and this is not always readily available!) would be needed to convert legal, religious, instructional, commercial and other types of documents into all South African languages.
- Not all South African languages have good orthographies which can be easily used for effective and efficient communication.

These arguments may seem valid at face value but they are actually misleading and at best cantankerous. There are several languages in the European Union and no one has complained but when it comes to Africa, only a non-indigenous European language can unify Africans. With regards to science and technology, it is evident how English has borrowed unashamedly from other languages, especially Greek and Latin, what then stops South African from doing the same? Another example which has worked perfectly well in South Africa is Afrikaans. The Afrikaners developed Afrikaans from a trade language to a standard where it is used exclusively in all spheres of life without any hindrance. The same principles and dedication can be used to develop and uplift the standard of the indigenous South African languages. The cost factor cannot be denied but it just has to be done. We do not know of any language with a perfect orthography and the English language is well-known for the chaotic nature of its orthography but that has not stopped the language from being where it is today. We have used these rebuttals to support our claim that the arguments used in favour of the retention of English and Afrikaans in South African classrooms is nothing but a 'convenience tag' for those who want to maintain the status quo (see Brock-Utne 2003).

### **Challenges of Using Indigenous African Languages in South African Classrooms**

The South African constitution may have provided the framework and platform on which indigenous South African languages may thrive but the reality is that this is not the case (see

Prah 2006; Mukama 2007). The same government which provided the constitution has closed down almost all colleges of education where these languages were taught and learnt. Furthermore, the departments of African languages in the various universities have been scaled down considerably. Thus there are no incentives for learning an indigenous South African language. Earlier, we referred to two documents dealing with language in education issues. As former teachers, we know that whatever the policy is, it is only applicable in government schools. There are many private schools which have a straight for English or Afrikaans policy. Even the former model C schools which are government funded, do not pay adequate attention to the teaching and learning of indigenous South African languages. What happens is that enlightened and affluent communities exploit loopholes in the constitution and the legislation through their School Governing Bodies to maintain the status quo and they are ready to take on the government in court should a challenge arise. The government has lost some of these cases and in instances where it has attempted to enforce the policy it has been done in a half-hearted manner. We cannot just bus in learners into a school and expect all to be well without adequate measures to follow up and make sure the right thing is being done. Again, at university level, it is the so-called historically white universities which are 'deemed' by the public to be doing well (WITS, Rhodes and UCT (English) and Stellenbosch (Afrikaans)). Thus they were not involved in the merger of higher institutions and the mergers have so far not improved the situation in some of the former historically black universities.

As academics, we feel strongly that the government is also not putting enough money into the development of African languages. Some of the policies are only good on paper but what is the reality on the ground? For instance, a look at the constitutional provisions on language-related issues shows that some languages are being neglected. Two examples which come to mind are the San/Nama group and Sign Language. There is an inclusive education policy but its implementation has been very problematic (see Klu and Quan-Baffour 2006). Officials are also not leading by example, they send their children to multiracial schools and their children speak African languages with heavy Euro-

pean accent hence the man on the street is not encouraged in any way to continue learning an African language. The researchers are also not aware of any research to find out from school children what language they would like to be taught in before the policy on language in education came into effect.

### CONCLUSION

The discussion in this paper has shown that there is a political will to advance the development of indigenous South African languages. However, the process of implementation is a big stumbling block. This none the less, should not stop the relevant stakeholders from making the effort to develop and advance indigenous South African languages. After all, a thousand mile journey begins in a day. There is also a school of thought which says that Africa has hitherto not developed to its full potential because of Africa's inability to break free from its colonial past. This should then serve as a test case where a bold initiative has been taken by an African country to develop and promote its languages.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

South Africa has to learn from other African countries which have made significant in-roads into the use indigenous languages in education, for example, Swahili in Tanzania, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo in Nigeria, Twi in Ghana and Ewe in Ghana and Togo to mention but a few. The colleges have to be re-opened and African language departments in the universities have to be properly utilized and equipped. Incentives have to be given to both learners and teachers of African languages just as it is being done for science and technology and accounting.

Furthermore, it is to be noted that the situation in South Africa is not as complex as it is in other African countries. The nine indigenous languages in South Africa can be collapsed into four on the basis of mutual intelligibility i.e. the Nguni languages, the Sotho languages, Tshivenda and Xitsonga. This proposal is not actually a new one as it has been in the literature for sometime now. We however, feel it should be given a serious re-look. This is important because in the internet data we referred to earlier, we observed huge disparity in the population of the speakers of the various languages. In theory,

every language is important but as criticism of the UNESCO report on mother tongue education shows that not all of us can have our way to use our languages in all situations so some tough choices have to be made at times.

Finally, officials especially those in government should be more responsible. They should learn to practice what they preach, gone are the days when a few people in power could easily take their followers for granted. They cannot justify a situation where they send their children to English medium schools and expect the populace not to follow suit.

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