

Towards a Quest of Making Indigenous South African Languages Relevant in South African Classrooms

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ABSTRACT The role of language in education was clearly indicated in 1958 when UNESCO declared that 'it is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue'. However, African languages have suffered the indignity of playing second fiddle to European Languages in African classrooms. This paper discusses this issue in the context of South Africa, where a new language policy has been introduced, which constitutionally recognises eleven official languages. Language educationists are particularly involved in this controversy about language use in classrooms. The issue at stake is the status of the eleven languages in education. The constitution has provided a non-diminutive clause specifying that no language should be diminished, but equal language status should be achieved by upgrading African languages. But how will this clause be implemented in education where the established and recognized medium of education is English and Afrikaans? The position of this paper is that concerted efforts have to be made to show learners that African languages have an important role to play in their education. The researchers therefore advocate that 'code-mixing' and 'code-switching' which have hitherto been frowned upon by language purists should be actively encouraged in South African classrooms as an aid to the learning process and a communicative resource.

BACKGROUND

The UNESCO declaration of 1958 states that:
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 (UNESCO 1958: 11).

But this has not been the case in South Africa where Afrikaans was imposed on the Black population and the development of other languages was deliberately suppressed. Since 1994, the new political dispensation has however taken up the challenge to see to the development of all the languages spoken in the country. Hence, South Africa has 11 official languages. Furthermore, a new language in education policy has been promulgated. The new language in education policy (Act 27 of 1996) aims, among other things, to:

- (i) establish additive multilingualism as an approach to language in education;
- (ii) promote and develop all official languages;
- (iii) re-dress the neglect of the historically disadvantaged languages in education.

Furthermore, the policy states that:

- (i) the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) must be an official language;
- (ii) the learner (or a parent in the case of a minor) must choose the LoLT and a school that offers that LoLT is obligated to admit the learner if there is place in the relevant grade;
- (iii) if no school in the area offers the desired LoLT, the learner may request the Department of Education to make such provision;
- (iv) the school governing body must determine the LoLT of a school, and stipulate how the school will promote multilingualism;
- (v) all learners must pass at least two languages as subjects (that is, a first language and a second language), one of which must be an official language.

Anyone familiar with South African history would agree that the current language in education policy is a radical change from the past (see Department of Education 1996, 1996e, 2003). It is, however, one thing to have a good plan and another to implement it. The reality is that access to such mother tongue education is often problematic and chaotic because of the limited number of qualified and competent teachers to offer lessons in the various mother tongues. And there is also the age old problem of inadequate instructional materials. With such

seemingly 'insurmountable' problems, English and to some extent Afrikaans continue to dominate in South African classrooms especially in higher education. The government is largely to blame for this because as policy maker it should have seen to it that the playing field is level. Instead, it has closed down almost all the colleges of education and this is where most mother tongue teachers were trained. Even if all the conditions were favourable there would still be the question of how many learners (or parents) are willing to be taught in their mother tongue (Brock-Utne 2003). The policy states 'there should be at least 45 learners in a grade for a particular mother tongue to be used as such'. This is just impossible in any multicultural/lingual society.

The Problem/Question

The researchers have had the privilege of either teaching in the South African educational system or working in various capacities with South African educators and our reason for this paper is based on the following observations:

- (i) Most schools have large multilingual/multicultural students/classes – blacks, whites, Indians, coloureds and international students – and although the medium of instruction is either Afrikaans or English, students often switch to their respective mother tongues in class when talking to each other or when they want clarifications from their colleagues.
- (ii) Code-switching and code-mixing is widely practised in the larger South African society especially in urban and peri-urban areas so it is useless for educators to try to stifle it in their classrooms.

The question then is: since students continually switch to their mother tongues in class, should code-switching not be actively encouraged to see if it will improve comprehension and communication in any way?

THE LINGUISTIC COMPOSITION OF MOST CLASSROOMS

Nine of the 11 official languages in South Africa are indigenous to the African continent, as these are Bantu languages. In addition, the high level of mutual intelligibility among the African languages also makes switching from

one code to the other relatively easy. What this means in practical terms is that all the 11 official South African languages are represented in most schools/classrooms, so code-switching and code-mixing constantly take place. The White students are mostly Afrikaans speakers, so they also switch or mix codes from time to time that is, Afrikaans to English and vice versa. In some cases, the White students who grew up on farms or in rural areas also speak some of the indigenous African languages.

This constant switch from one language to another is what has become known as either code-mixing or code-switching, depending on how it takes place. Research by Gumperz (1982), Wardaugh (1986), Meyers-Scotton (1992) and Halai and Karuku (2013) has shown that the two processes are part and parcel of the repertoire of fluent bilinguals who share the same understanding and it is mostly motivated by social consequences. In a study by Peires (1994: 4 - 21) on Xhosa speaking students at the University of Transkei (now Walter Sisulu University), it was observed that code-switching was normal and was expected by the participants and it is perceived as an aid to the learning process (see also Chimbanga and Mokgwathi 2012).

This perhaps is what prompted UNESCO to make its declaration in 1958, but the sad reality is that language purists frown on and actually discourage bilinguals from either code-mixing or code-switching. According to Adendorff (1993: 4), some educators perceive code-switching as an indecent and forbidden form of behaviour.

Now with 11 official languages and a language in education policy to back it up, why should educators not allow such natural processes to take place in South African classrooms when it is already happening in the larger society? The researchers do not pretend to have the answers to the question or a perfect solution to the problem. The researchers have however done the following to meet the needs of our students at the University of Venda:

At the start of each school year, we establish the number of languages represented in our classrooms. The researchers then tell the students they are free to use their mother tongue but on condition that whatever they say would be said aloud and other students who understand their language would have the right to translate, correct or question what was said and how

it was said. This takes care of naughty students who might want to turn the class into a circus. It also deals with problems of varieties within a language so that the concept of standard and non-standard varieties within a language becomes clearer to them. Most of the researchers' students struggle with the concept of Standard English and the problem is worse now that they use what we call 'SMS' language.

Furthermore, from time to time the researchers ask students how a particular idea or concept would be expressed in their language. They feel this is important for the purpose of intercultural communication. It also helps them to show how thinking in one language and transferring it into another language without care or caution can cause serious communication problems. For instance, science students are expected to be familiar with the language of science which has its particular characteristics. Whereas they can mention the private parts of the human anatomy 'freely' in English this cannot be done in an African language. In fact, it is a taboo and one is considered uncouth to do that in public. So in such a situation, they stick to English to ease communication. It is therefore established that the two codes can be used together!

The researchers also use code-mixing and code-switching to teach perceived language errors and how it can be possibly dealt with. For instance, many of our students have very serious problems with spelling and this has been exacerbated by the advent of SMS, but some of the spelling problems are actually a result of faulty pronunciation due to mother tongue interference (pronoun/*pronunciation, prescribe/*prescription, *octom-ber, *interprinte). Once this has sunk in, the classes actually become lively as students become relaxed and make jokes when their fellow students are speaking and readily offer suggestions for correction without anyone becoming offended or uncomfortable. Faulty grammatical expressions such 'last of last week' 'small father' 'I ask money' have been corrected when student release that what is acceptable in one language may not necessarily be right in another language.

CONCLUSION

At first, using another language instead of English in class may seem strange and awkward to many of our students but with time, they feel at ease and even shy students begin to partici-

pate actively in class. When they realise that English also has borrowed words from African languages for example, voodoo (Ewe), kwashiorkor (Gã), indaba (Zulu), they now accept that their languages are not inferior.

The researchers' position therefore is that whilst the role and importance of English cannot be over emphasized, this should not be done at the expense of indigenous South African languages. Code-mixing and code-switching should actually be encouraged where necessary as we believe they help in enhancing understanding and better communication in multilingual settings. When educated South Africans do this, other members of the society will take note, follow suit and indigenous South African languages will inevitably develop from this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With the government policies in place to promote indigenous South African languages efforts should be made to encourage their use at every given opportunity and the classroom can be a good starting point. Schools, especially universities should take a critical look at the government policies and come up realistic and workable policies of their own to help promote and sustain the use indigenous South African languages.

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