

# Additive Bilingualism in the South African Language-in-Education Policy: Is there Proof of the Pudding?

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## Historical Perspectives

After the transition to full democracy in 1994 a new South African language-in-education policy was formulated to meet the needs of a society in transformation (Department of Education 1997). The policy was designed to allow freedom of choice, while adhering to the underlying principles of equity, practicability, and the need to redress the results of the past discriminatory laws and practices. The new policy has been described as one of the most progressive in the world (Probyn *et al.* 2002:29). Critics, however, believe that the implementation of the policy leaves much to be desired. In order to appraise the policy, it is necessary to understand the sociohistorical factors that have impacted on the formation of current policies and approaches to multilingualism in South Africa (Bekker 1999:99; St. Clair 1982:164). This paper will therefore begin with a brief sketch of the historical background against which the current language-in-education policy can be analysed and evaluated.

In keeping with the *Zeitgeist* of seventeenth century colonialism, the early colonial history of South Africa was characterised by a general disregard for the indigenous languages of the Cape Colony. Ultimately, after two centuries of contact with the Dutch settlers, the Khoesan languages are close to extinction (Alexander 1989: 12-15; Crawhall 1993:6; Steyn1980:106). There are only a few varieties that are still spoken in Namibia and in Botswana and these are also severely threatened (Traill 2002:44). After the second and final British occupation of the Cape in 1806,

a language struggle began between Dutch (later to become Afrikaans) and English, which was destined to dominate the linguistic history of South Africa for the next two centuries. The struggle was in reaction to the language policy of the new colonial masters, one that focused on replacing 'Dutch with English as the dominant language in public life in the colony' (Reagan 1986:2).

At the same time the colonists were coming into contact increasingly with the speakers of the Bantu languages and there was considerable missionary activity. As was the case in other parts of Africa, the missionaries played a major role in the codification of the indigenous languages and in the education of the local population. According to Alexander (1989:20), the language-in-education policy of the time, while allowing rudimentary education through the mother tongue, was aimed at cultivating an Anglocentric elite among the local population:

British colonial language policy was one of tolerating basic (primary-level) schooling in the relevant indigenous languages (i.e. for the small percentage of black children who actually went to school) and promoting English-medium instruction in a classically Anglocentric curriculum for the tiny mission elite.

A consequence of this policy was the emergence of positive attitudes among many members of the local population towards the English culture and language at the expense of their own cultures and languages. A command of English was seen as a *sine qua non* for improving their socio-economic and socio-cultural status. This positive attitude towards English *vis-à-vis* the local languages was also exhibited by members of the early resistance movement in South Africa which was made up mainly of members of the black middle class. According to Alexander (1989:28) this group 'plumped for English and adopted an elitist and patronising attitude towards the languages of the people'. Nevertheless, there were attempts during this period to extend the use and status of the indigenous languages in education. For instance, isiZulu was introduced as a subject in the Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) schools in 1885 (Hartshorne 1987:86) and by 1922, a vernacular was a compulsory primary school subject in black schools in all the provinces.

After the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and the subsequent formation of the Union of South Africa, the earlier struggle between the colonial languages took on a new dimension. Fearing the crushing effect of British hegemony, there were many descendants of the Dutch colonists who felt compelled to continue the struggle for the rights of the Afrikaner. Hand in hand with the political battle went a struggle for language rights. Although South Africa was officially a bilingual country with equal rights for the two official languages, Dutch and English, firmly entrenched in the constitution, Standard Dutch was not really spoken in South Africa. The local variety of Dutch was different from the Dutch spoken in the Netherlands and the official variety supported by the Constitution. This local variety that became known as Afrikaans turned out to be the symbol of a people seeking their own identity and their freedom from British hegemony and concomitantly, English. The struggle for the establishment and recognition of Afrikaans as an autonomous language came to fruition in 1925 when it became one of the official languages of South Africa. In the mid thirties, Afrikaans was introduced into Bantu education. In the Free State schools a dual-medium approach (i.e. the use of both English and Afrikaans as media of instruction) was adopted and by 1938 Afrikaans had become a compulsory subject in black schools throughout the country (Hartshorne 1987:87).

In 1948, when the National Party (NP) came to power, Afrikaans became linked to the ruling political party. It is worth noting that in contrast to the NP whose political struggle was essentially linked to the language rights of Afrikaans speakers, the political struggle of the African National Congress (ANC), who sought to empower the black people of South Africa, was not linked to the struggle for language rights. The ANC, seeking to unite people from various linguistic backgrounds, chose English as a 'neutral' language that would link the nation with the outside world.

The main thrust of the NP's language policy was the promotion of mother-tongue education. In white education school children were compelled by law to receive education in their mother tongues (either English or Afrikaans) and all forms of bilingual or dual medium education were discouraged. In black education mother-tongue education (in the indigenous Bantu languages) was compulsory for the first four years, and thereafter one of the two official languages had to be used. The NP's policy

of mother-tongue education was an integral part of this party's policy of separate development (*apartheid*). It was rationalised as an attempt to preserve the diverse cultures of the indigenous populations, but essentially, was 'a divide and rule' tactic (Marivate 1992:91; Robertson 1973:165). According to Robertson (1973:ii-iii) the primary aim of this ethnocentric education system was racial and social segregation:

one of the prime functions of education in South Africa is to prepare each child to occupy a niche in a highly segregated, hierarchical and static society, with the relative position of each individual in that hierarchy being determined by the sole criterion of skin colour.

The architects of apartheid claimed that the separate development of the different racial groups would be in their best interest as the groups would be free from the domination by other groups. However, speeches of NP Members of Parliament during the period just preceding the implementation of the Bantu Education Act, as exemplified in the following extract from a speech by J.N. le Roux (Minister of Agriculture), quoted in Marivate (1992:98-102), belie these sentiments:

We should not give the natives an academic education, as some people are prone to do. If we do this we shall later be burdened with a number of academically trained Europeans and Non-Europeans, and who is going to do the labour in the country? I am in thorough agreement with the view that we should so conduct our schools that the native who attends those schools will know that to a great extent he must be the labourer in the country.

It is not surprising that the Bantu Education Act of 1953 was perceived as promoting an inferior form of education and that the NP's policies were rejected by many black people. Ironically, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 was passed at the same time that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) adopted the mother-tongue principal in education (Crawhall 1993:7).

The Achilles heel of the NP policy was the introduction of a dual language medium of instruction policy. Once the mother-tongue instruction

period was completed, black children were compelled to learn some subjects through the medium of English and others through the medium of Afrikaans (Hartshorne 1987:91). There was immediate resistance to the Act in the form of demands for the use of only one medium of instruction i.e. English. In 1954-55 the African National Congress (ANC) organised a boycott of Bantu Education schools and in 1955 they adopted the Freedom Charter, roundly condemning Bantu Education. The Freedom Charter recognised equal language rights and the right for all people to develop their cultures. Superficially, this seemed similar to the apartheid policy. The fundamental difference between these viewpoints, however, was that the ANC recognised this as a right and a measure of accommodation and not as an enforcement that characterised the restrictive nature of the NP policy.

Despite the opposition, the Bantu Education Department remained intransigent on its dual-medium position (Hartshorne 1987:93). The situation came to a head when the Department decided to make black scholars write high school entrance examinations a year earlier after seven years of schooling instead of eight i.e. at the end of Std 5 (Grade 7) instead of Std 6 (Grade 8). Some of the subjects had to be written in English and others in Afrikaans, which was an added burden for the learners (Hartshorne 1987:95). On 17 May 1976 students in Soweto began to boycott classes on a wholesale basis. 16 June 1976 is historically marked as the day on which violent confrontation erupted between students and the police, an event that claimed at least 176 lives (Hartshorne 1987:96-97; Thompson 1995:212-13; Marivate 1992:135-142). This resistance brought to an end the dual medium policy of the NP government (Alexander 1989:25 and Marivate 1992:142) and by 1978 the vast majority of African pupils were being taught in English only at secondary level (Hartshorne 1987:97). In 1983 regulations were passed legislating the use of English as medium of instruction from Std 3 (Grade 5) onwards (Hartshorne 1987:98).

The main consequence of the enforcement of the Bantu Education Act of 1953 was the creation of negative attitudes towards Afrikaans as well as distrust towards the Department of Bantu Education (Hartshorne 1987:99). Another devastating consequence was the discrediting of mother-tongue education among the black population. In addition there was a move towards English as the language of liberation. Crawhall (1993:7) notes:

the liberation movement ... stigmatised both Afrikaans and the vernacular languages ... leading the progressive rank and file to join their leaders in a reactionary ... endorsement of English as the language of liberation.

The government's attempt to force the use of Afrikaans in black schools had caused language to become a major issue resulting in the 1976 Soweto riots. The symbolic significance of the two languages in the early twentieth century was now reversed: Afrikaans became the language of the oppressor, while English was seen as the language of liberation. Interestingly, the position of English as an ex-colonial language rather than as the language of liberation, primarily characterised the language debate in the period preceding the democratic elections of 1994, especially among the black intelligentsia. This concern is expressed in Crawhall (1993:9):

English has been a double-edged sword for the liberation movement ... it has been a powerful instrument of liberation ... on the other hand ... it provides its speakers with an entry point into the capitalist class system thus potentially co-opting the leaders ... and alienating the rank and file ... it is a vehicle for a hegemony that may undermine participatory democracy.

The position of English *vis-à-vis* the African languages and the future status of Afrikaans were of central concern to those involved in the language policy debates and other negotiations preceding the endorsement of an interim Constitution in November 1993 (see Crawhall 1993). The Constitution, on ratification, stipulated that South Africa would have eleven official languages: English, Afrikaans, isiNdebele, Sesotho sa Leboa, Sesotho, siSwati, Xitsonga, Setswana, Tshivenda, isiXhosa, and isiZulu (Thompson 1995:250). This provision was retained in the final Constitution of 1996. (It should be noted that Sesotho sa Leboa is also referred to as Sepedi or North Sotho in later revisions of the Constitution).

It is against this historical background that in 1995 the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) established the Language Plan Task Group (LANGTAG) in order to provide the Minister with a National Language Plan for South Africa (LANGTAG 1996:7) and

the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) was established in 1996 as a body which would monitor the observance of the Constitutional provisions and principles relating to the use of languages, as well as language policy matters. One of the recommendations of LANGTAG (1996:3) was the promotion of African languages as languages of learning and teaching (LoLTs) in high status domains such as tertiary education i.e. at universities and technikons.

### **The Language-in-Education Policy**

The new language-in-education policy was conceived as an integral part of the new government's strategy to build a non-racial nation in South Africa. It is meant to facilitate communication across the barriers of colour and language, while fostering an environment in which respect for all languages used in the country would be encouraged. In line with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, cultural and linguistic diversity is recognized as a national asset.

As discussed above, the inherited language-in-education policy in South Africa was underpinned by racial and linguistic discrimination. These key factors severely affected access to the education system and the academic success of learners. Today, only 25% of black South Africans are functionally literate in English, the main language for access to education and more lucrative jobs in South Africa (Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000:6). To redress the effects of these policies is one of the major challenges facing educators in South Africa.

The architects of the policy recognize that both societal and individual multilingualism are the global norm today, especially on the African continent. The policy states that the learning of more than one language should be general practice and principle in South African society and that 'being multilingual should be a defining characteristic of being South African' (Department of Education 1997: no. 4.1.4).

The core characteristics of the policy are: flexibility, freedom of choice, equity and practicability. These characteristics are manifested in the main aims of the policy as stated in Department of Education (1997). These are:

1. To promote full participation in society and the economy to equitable and meaningful access to education.
2. 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;
3. To promote and develop all the official languages;
4. To support the teaching and learning of all other languages required by learners or used by communities in South Africa, including languages used for religious purposes, languages which are important for international trade and communication, and South African Sign Language, as well as Alternative and Augmentative communication;
5. To counter disadvantages resulting from different kinds of mismatches between home languages ['mother tongues'] and languages of learning and teaching;
6. To develop programmes for the redress of previously disadvantaged languages.

The underlying principle of the policy is the maintenance of the mother tongue (or home language) whilst providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional languages. In other words, the Department of Education supports the system of additive bilingualism. Basically, this means that the learners should be allowed access to their mother tongues as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT), but should they be required to make a transition to another LoLT, this should not be done at the expense of their mother-tongue. At the same time the policy clearly states that 'the right to choose the language of learning and teaching is vested in the individual' ((Department of Education 1997: no. 4.1.6). This means that learners or their parents have the right to choose a LoLT which can be their mother-tongue or not.

### **Mother-tongue Education**

Table 1 shows the number of mother-tongue speakers of the 11 official languages of South Africa as taken from Mesthrie (2002:13).



**Table 1: Mother-tongue Speakers of the Official Languages of South Africa in 1996**

<i>Language</i>	<i>Number of Speakers</i>	<i>% of Population</i>
Ndebele	586,961	1.5
Swati	1,013,193	2.5
Xhosa	67,196,118	17.9
Zulu	9,200,144	22.9
North Sotho	3,695,846	9.2
South Sotho	3,104,197	7.7
Tswana	3,301,774	8.2
Tsonga	1,176,105	4.4
Venda	876,409	2.2
Afrikaans	15,811,547	14.4
English	3,457,467	8.6

It is evident that the vast majority of South Africans (more than 70%) are mother-tongue speakers of an African language. As the LoLT in most South African schools above the lower primary level is generally English (and to a lesser extent Afrikaans), it is clear that most South Africans learn through a language that is not their mother-tongue. For speakers of African languages the question of additive bilingualism is a crucial issue, as their access to education is dependent on it.

In the additive-bilingualism approach the learner gains competence in the second language while maintaining the first language. This has positive social and cognitive benefits (Harmers and Blanc 1989:56; Lambert 1970:117). Subtractive bilingualism occurs when the second language is learnt at the expense of the first, gradually replacing it. This may hinder cognitive and social development. Heugh (2000:4) maintains:

In a multilingual society where a language such as English is highly prized, there is only one viable option and this is bilingual education where adequate linguistic development is foregrounded in the mother tongue whilst the second language is systematically added. If the mother tongue is replaced, the second language will not be adequately learned and the linguistic proficiency in both languages will be compromised.

Proponents of an additive bilingualism approach argue that speakers of African languages should be allowed the use of their mother tongues as LoLTS until they have reached the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) level (Cummins 1979), while learning English as a second language. This would permit effective transition to English as the LoLT. However, it does not seem to be happening. De Klerk (2002b:15) warns that 'the state of language education in South Africa presents signs of a growing crisis'. Her study of learners in the Eastern Cape schools supports other studies (Rossouw 1999; de Wet 2002; Lemmer 1995; Moyo 2001; Ward 2003) that the new language-in-education policy has been ignored and that parents are opting for a straight-for-English approach.

Why is mother-tongue education not effective in South Africa? Obanya (1999) identifies a number of reasons why African languages are generally not used in African education: These include: the multiplicity of languages within the borders of most African countries, multi-ethnic populations in urban areas, the official status of indigenous languages in most African countries, the level of technical development of African languages, the hostility of Africans to the study of their own languages, the lack of personnel and appropriate materials, the high cost of educating in the indigenous languages and, the long term ill-effects of educating learners in the mother-tongue. The above-mentioned reasons provide the basis for our examination of the implementation of mother-tongue education in South Africa.

With regard to multiplicity of languages, there is no denying that the multiplicity of languages within South Africa makes it more difficult to implement mother-tongue instruction in the schools. There are nine official, standardized African languages in South Africa. Furthermore, there is often considerable dialectal variation within these speech communities. It would certainly be easier to promote the African languages as LoLTs if we had a situation where one African language was used as a lingua franca, as in the case of Swahili in Tanzania. Theoretically this is possible in South Africa as seven of the nine languages may be categorized into two genetically related groups, viz. the Sotho and the Nguni groups. Proposals (Nhlapho 1945; Alexander 1991) for harmonizing the varieties within these groups to create two major standard African languages in South Africa, however, have not been met with much enthusiasm. Linguistic traditions as well as cultural and

political differences pose hindrances. For instance, the speakers of the two major Nguni languages, Zulu and Xhosa, have different and strongly opposing political affiliations.

The situation is far more complex in urban areas. Multi-ethnic populations exist in the major cities and townships in Gauteng, in particular. In addition to this, a number of urban, mixed varieties such as Pretoria-Sotho, Flaaitaal and other koines, are spoken in the townships, especially amongst the youth (Schuring 1985; Mfusi 1992; Molamu 1993; Makhudu 1995). Schools segregated along ethnolinguistic lines would be neither practicable nor in accordance with government policy.

The level of technical development of the African languages in South Africa is often cited as a reason why they cannot function effectively as LoLTs. Although language boards were put in place during the apartheid era to develop terminology in the African languages, the issue of term creation in African languages has been fraught with problems. In a study on the standardization of Zulu, van Huyssteen (1993:6-7) identifies several difficulties. These include: inconsistencies in the application of rules in relation to orthographies and terminology, lack of standardization in the word-formation patterns in Zulu, inadequate cultural and sociolinguistic sensitivity by terminologists, and inadequate research on the use of oral and written corpora in term creation as well as the lack of consideration of the extent to which existing standardized terms have been accepted and used by the Zulu-speaking community.

The level of technical development or degree of elaboration of a language is also related to the matter of status. Languages that are 'underdeveloped' tend to be perceived as having low status. The African languages have only enjoyed official status for a decade. This has not been long enough for the effects of the past discrimination to be counteracted. The prejudices of the past cannot simply be wiped out overnight by an entry in the statute book. These languages may have *de jure* status but they do not yet enjoy *de facto* status.

Although all these factors undoubtedly have played a role in determining the use of African languages (or lack thereof) as LoLTs, the reason that appears to be cited the most for their lack of use is the speakers' attitudes towards the use of their own languages as LoLTs. This complex issue needs to be examined carefully. A number of studies claim that

speakers of African languages generally prefer English as the LoLT and have a lower regard for bilingual or vernacular education (cf. Young et al. 1991, de Klerk & Bosch 1993, 1994; de Klerk 1996; Mutasa 1999; Mokhahlane 2000; de Klerk 2002a).

In a recent study on the attitudes of South African parents towards the language-in-education policy, Ward (2003) examined three schools: (a) a suburban state primary school (formerly a model C white school), (b) a township state primary school and (c) a suburban independent primary school (private school). The findings of the survey showed an overwhelming support for English as the LoLT. In all three schools over 90 percent of the respondents were in favour of English as the LoLT. It is worth noting that only 7% of the respondents in the township school were in favour of mother-tongue instruction. Some of the more commonly cited reasons were: English allows one to get better jobs, English is used internationally, one must master English to succeed in life, English is important for further study, English is the language of business, and that most of the technical scientific words are in English. Ward (2003:174) deduced that respondents were largely unaware of the benefits to be derived from bilingual education and were either ignorant of or ill informed about the process of transfer from L1 to L2.

Bekker (2002:158) warns against simplistic interpretation of results of attitudinal studies. He sees the positive attitudes of African-language speakers towards English as a matter of instrumental rather than integrative motivation. His findings reveal that English is generally seen as a way to individual socio-economic advancement. It has also been viewed as a vehicle of African liberation, for advancing the socio-economic and political status of the African population rather than as a resource for mass social mobility integration into the white group. African languages play a vital role as markers of social group identity and thus promote the early cognitive and affective development of the child.

The strongest and most obvious reasons for the positive attitudes towards English are its value for economic empowerment, its status as an international language and its utility as a basis for cross-cultural communication. These factors, together with the support given to English by the black elite and the negative perceptions of mother-tongue education (as a result of its strong associations in the past with Bantu Education) are the

main cause of the negative attitudes towards mother-tongue education in South Africa.

Some researchers (de Wet 2002:119; Lemmer 1995:92; Moyo 2001:111; Rossouw 1999:10) believe that the lack of suitable textbooks and materials in the various African languages contributes to the lack of their use as LoLTs. There is undoubtedly a need for more texts to be produced in order to meet the specialised language needs of the speakers of African languages. If there was a will to produce the material, a way would be found. The case of Afrikaans is often brought up in arguments of this nature: a full range of school text books and a high degree of advanced technical literature exist in Afrikaans. It must be borne in mind, however, that the struggle for Afrikaans was strongly motivated and supported by a political ideology. In the case of the African languages, it not supported in this way. The cost of producing the material may be a factor but it is difficult to determine if this is a genuine obstacle in implementing effective bilingual education in South Africa as no significant studies have been conducted in this area that could support the argument.

Another factor which lacks any substantial proof is the idea that there are long term ill-effects resulting from mother-tongue education. Research on bilingualism over the past four decades (summarized in Barnes 1990) has disproved this idea. There is sufficient counter-evidence available in this regard. For instance, many Afrikaans-speaking South Africans have successfully completed courses through English at tertiary level, having only studied the LoLT as a second language at school. It is important to note that in the case of these learners, the CALP level of their mother tongue had been well established before they entered tertiary education. Although one could probably disregard the myth of the negative effects of the long term use of the mother tongue as LoLT as a non-issue in the debate, it is a popular misconception in the minds of some sectors of the population. If people believe that mother-tongue education is harmful, the myth may become a stumbling block to the implementation of bilingual education.

## **The Way Ahead**

What is the way ahead in South African education? Mother-tongue instruction continues to be perceived negatively by the black community and

we continue to reap the legacy of apartheid. If the language-in-education policy is to be implemented successfully, some radical changes will have to be made. We are faced with a paradox. On the one hand, the language-in-education policy states that the individual has the right to choose the LoLT. On the other hand, the policy states that is necessary to promote and develop the previously disadvantaged and neglected indigenous South African languages. In exercising their democratic rights parents often fail to consider the impact of their choices. As stated previously, parents are still ignorant of their rights, are not informed of the numerous benefits of learning through the mother tongue, are still caught up in the chains of our sociohistorical past and therefore, still view mother-tongue education negatively. On the whole they follow old habits or current trends uncritically. What is urgently needed is the dissemination of information. Parents, teachers, the school boards and the learners themselves should be made aware of the options. They also need to be made aware of the research findings on the advantages of additive bilingualism. The issue of choosing a LoLT is often confused with that of mastering the language. There is a popular belief that adopting English as a LoLT automatically improves one's knowledge of English. A straight for English approach can be disastrous in the context of a rural school.

Many factors need to be considered when deciding on a language policy in a school. The issue of literacy is one factor that is often neglected. The policy talks about bilingualism. However, to be more precise, it is biliteracy that is our real concern. Specials skills need to be developed in acquiring literacy. A well established level of literacy in the mother-tongue is the best foundation for developing literacy in the L2. Matjila and Pretorius (2004) have found alarmingly low levels of literacy in both the L1 and L2 of many African language-speaking learners. Their research findings support other studies which have proved that the learner should learn to think and function in the L1 up to CALP level before the learner can transfer the skills to the L2 successfully. The process of learning through another language can be a traumatic experience. It can take the learner seven years to acquire the necessary CALP skills in the L2. An inadequate transfer of skills may significantly delay and sometimes permanently impair the learners' academic development.

The situation can be improved by research, dissemination of research findings to all stakeholders, consultation between experts and

relevant parent and governing bodies, adequate training of teachers and the production of suitable materials. Many challenges do lie ahead and these are not impossible. When we 'realize' that there can also be strength in diversity, then there is hope for a successful implementation of the South African language-in-education policy.

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