

Using African Languages for Teacher Education

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Abstract

This article reports on the use of an African language in an Action Research module which was offered as part of a continuing teacher development certificate programme. The article firstly addresses the role of African languages in teacher education and how African languages can be used as languages of tuition for providing better epistemological access to learning content. Secondly, it touches on teachers' perceptions of the role of the mother tongue in their own professional development and teaching practice. Furthermore, the article argues that investment in African languages at teacher training level is crucial if mother tongue based bilingual education (MTBBE) is to be effectively implemented. It concludes that there is a need for shifts in language attitudes, changes in institutional language policies, investments in staffing as well as teaching and learning resources across the curriculum for the realisation of MTTBE in schools.

Keywords: action research, Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), African languages, biliteracy, English, isiXhosa, Mother Tongue Based Bilingual Education (MTTBE), teacher education

1. African Languages, Policy and Teacher Education in South Africa

The language of learning and teaching (LoLT) remains one of the most con-

troversial issues in South African education. Three-and-a-half centuries of colonialism and apartheid have resulted in a language regime in which the valorisation of Afrikaans and English came at the expense of the indigenous African languages, which have been systematically excluded from the political economy (Bamgbose 2000). This societal exclusion is reflected in their marginalisation in education at both school and teacher development levels. Depriving children from using the mother tongue as their primary learning resource results in cultural alienation, a lack of self-confidence, and under-achievement (Braam 2004: 37).

Historically, the match between the languages used in teacher education, and those used by teachers in their own classrooms and schools was taken for granted in the case of Afrikaans and English, whose native speakers have for decades been schooled and (teacher-) trained in their respective home languages. Under Bantu Education (1955-1976), African-language speaking teacher trainees were forced to undergo a form of trilingual training that reflected the imposition of the two official languages, while allowing for only a minor role for their mother tongue (Hartshorne 1995). In post-apartheid South Africa, teacher education has come to reflect the societal dominance of English, and the gradual demise of Afrikaans. Despite official multilingualism at the level of the Constitution, the national language-in-education policy for public schools which promotes additive bi/multilingualism (DoE 1997), and other pieces of enabling legislation, African languages continue in practice to be marginalised in both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes. The principle of aligning the language of tuition for teacher training with the LoLT to be used in schools appears to apply only to dominant languages. To our knowledge the only formal use of an African language in teacher education anywhere in South Africa is at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, which runs a bilingual PGCE programme at Foundation Phase level (Grades R - 3) in which isiZulu is used for tuition and assessment alongside English (Mbatha 2008).

Using African languages for teacher training is one of the most difficult tasks facing post-apartheid South Africa. This is because the hegemony of English in the public sphere (Alexander 2006) profoundly shapes language attitudes, and functions to circumscribe people's language choices. In a globalising world in which the profiling, resourcing and range of functions allocated to English in society and education is unprecedented,

it is evident that in the absence of any strong ideological affiliation to particular languages, instrumentality will guide language choices. That is, language ‘choice’ is to a large extent circumscribed by the linguistic market and the collective habitus (Benson 2008). Recall that for Bourdieu (1991), the process by which society legitimates and gives currency to the languages of the powerful (and marginalises the languages of the oppressed) is a form of symbolic violence in which dominated people are complicit. This complicity resides in the habitus, a set of dispositions or collective mindset that is difficult to change, since it lies largely beyond ‘the usual dichotomy of freedom and constraint’ (1991:55). In South Africa, Gogolin (1997) has identified the monolingual habitus that valorises English as particularly disabling for the majority who speak African languages first.

Aligning the languages of teacher training with the languages of schooling is nevertheless one of the most self-evident tasks for mother tongue based bilingual education (MTBBE) in South Africa. MTBBE assumes that the schooling system is to be based not on a second or a third language, but on learners’ mother tongues (Alexander 2006). At present most African-language speaking children experience a maximum of three years’ of mother tongue education (MTE), before the (on-paper) transition to English in Grade 4. It is well documented that the (oral) use of the home language continues *de facto*, as the transition to English as LoLT in the fourth year of schooling is premature in most African-language contexts. Teachers and learners often collude in a range of compensatory behaviours, including code-switching, rote memorisation, chorusing and safetalk to mask the absence of learning (Arthur 2001; Ferguson 2003; Brock-Utne 2004; Alidou *et al.* 2006). It is also widely recognised even within government circles that the use of the mother tongue for learning for at least the first six Grades represents an essential, if insufficient, step in ensuring literacy and numeracy development (see DoE 2005).

There is solid policy support for the use of African languages in education. National policy in teacher education and development (DoE 2007: 29), for instance, contains the following encouraging if somewhat vague stipulations:

64. Programmes that will improve teachers’ competence in the language of learning and teaching, and in the teaching of literacy and reading

skills in all phases, will be supported.

65. The link between language and learning must be promoted, including the use of indigenous languages. Programmes to promote language use in education will be supported, and all teachers should have the opportunity of learning an indigenous African language.

More concrete guidelines are laid out in the Ministerial report on higher education (MoE 2003). It recommends that each higher education institution should, in partnership with other relevant HEIs, select one or more indigenous African languages to be developed for use in higher education (MoE 2003: 21). In this regard, the University of the Western Cape is one of those identified in relation to the cultivation of isiXhosa. The report also makes the far-reaching recommendation that

higher education institutions, government and the private sector should collaborate in identifying on a regional basis prioritised courses that could be progressively translated into an African language (MoE 2003: 22).

This opens the door for UWC, in partnership with the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), to target teacher education programmes.

The WCED's Language Transformation Plan (2007), which aims at extending the use of mother tongue instruction in primary schools, is an effort at improving the status of marginalised languages in education. As part of the pilot project 15 teachers were enrolled for the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE): Language Education programme. The bilingual programme is designed to equip participants with appropriate methods to assist them to teach through the medium of English and isiXhosa in the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4-6). It thus aims to foster students' skills in the two languages in order, ultimately, for them to develop biliteracy in their learners. Some adjustments to the existing ACE had to be made to accommodate the LTP's main focus on LoLT.

In the light of the above, this article addresses the critical issue of the role of African languages in teacher education. It touches on how African languages can be used as languages of tuition for better epistemological

access to learning content. The authors taught on several of the ACE modules, using both isiXhosa and English. The main focus of this article is on the Action Research module, co-facilitated by a non-Xhosa-speaking lecturer and a Xhosa-speaking lecturer. Issues that have emerged in subsequent interviews with course participants include the value of mother tongue teaching, the development of a metalanguage in isiXhosa, gaining epistemological access to complex texts, and the freedoms and constraints of language choices in an academic environment dominated by English.

2. Teacher Development and the ACE

Global pressures and changing national priorities tend to affect the structure and functioning of certain sectors such as education, health, and the judiciary. In cases of policy shifts for transformation, the state usually, makes demands on higher education institutions and schools to respond by providing the identified services and skills. In many countries teacher education tends to reflect the areas targeted by the state, such as training in mathematics, science, literacy, and multicultural education (Popkewitz & Pereyra 1993).

In South African education, many changes have taken place over the past 15 years of democracy. In particular, the introduction of the outcomes-based curriculum demanded that changes be made in teacher development with regard to pedagogy, teacher identities and roles to facilitate effective implementation in schools (Grosser & De Waal 2008; Swart & Oswald 2008). Ongoing efforts are being made to induct teachers into the New Curriculum Statement (NCS), but the training does not focus on teachers' epistemological and pedagogical development in terms of conceptual knowledge, creative thinking and innovativeness. In response to the national literacy and numeracy crisis in many South African schools as reflected in the systemic evaluation and PIRLS 2006 results (Howie *et al.* 2007), the Western Cape Education Department developed a Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2006 - 2016 (WCED 2006), which prioritizes teacher development as a key area in improving teaching and learning in this province.

The Language Transformation Plan (LTP), which is central to this article, is also one of the key features of the WCED's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2006). One of the targets of the LTP is to promote the use of the

mother tongue as LoLT to at least the end of Grade 6, preferably through mother tongue based bilingual education (MTBBE). By MTBBE is meant

that the mother tongue is used for learning and an additional language is gradually added and strengthened to the point where it could be the LoLT after a period of say 6 years (WCED 2007:4).

The LTP's emphasis on MTBBE implies that teachers have to be trained to be able to develop learners' literacy skills in at least two of the dominant languages of the Western Cape, namely, English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. Such a process entails managing the development of learners' mother tongue, the phasing in of the additional language, and the conceptual transfer between the learner's two languages to the point where the additional language could be successfully used as LoLT.

As mentioned earlier, the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) was introduced to 15 teachers from different education districts of the Western Cape in response to the LTP in 2007. All the teachers were mother tongue speakers of isiXhosa, the main African (Bantu) language in the Western Cape. The ACE is one of the programmes aiming at continuous professional teacher development as stipulated in the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (2007) and the Norms & Standards (2000). The ACE in bilingual education was offered jointly by the University of the Western Cape (Faculty of Education) and the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA), based at the University of Cape Town. The qualification was offered over two years of part time study with 10 modules of 12 credits each, and is pitched at level 6 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF),

According to Korthagen and Kessels (1999) teacher development programmes should emphasize reflective teaching. They should also enable teachers to integrate relevant theories into practice. Following this principle, the ACE curriculum comprised the following modules: (i) Language education practical (Proficiency course); (ii) Language in education policy in schools; (iii) Language learning in classrooms; (iv) Innovative language teaching methodologies; (v) Teaching reading in schools; (vi) Teaching writing in schools; (vii) Language across the curriculum; (viii) Assessing

language competence; (ix) Designing language materials; and (x) Action Research.

The programme also applied the genre-based approach of systemic-functional linguistics while seeking to enable students to develop their learners' literacy and language skills in their home language (isiXhosa) and in the additional language (English). The approach focuses on choices made at different levels of the language system, i.e. how context and role relationships shape language choices. As explained by the 2007 programme convenor¹, aligning the core modules on reading and writing, assessment and language across the curriculum with a genre-based approach to language learning represented a key challenge. It involved adopting a principled approach to literacy and language development that would help learners to control key school text types (not only narrative) in both home and first additional languages. It also sought to support teachers in thinking through the transition from one LoLT to another. Genre-based approaches usefully give teachers a grasp of the textual and linguistic features of widely-used genres, and use a pedagogical framework that moves through stages of modelling and scaffolded support to independent control. Some publishers have promised to support the project by making learning area materials available in Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa to Grade 6.

Thus it was envisaged that through the genre-based approach teachers would be enabled to develop biliteracy skills in their learners, and at the same time manage the transition to English as LoLT by Grade 7 – a new undertaking in teacher education involving African languages in the post-apartheid dispensation.

3. The Action Research Module

A central goal of the Action Research module was to enable teachers to 'find their own voices' (cf. Ball 2003) as teacher-researchers by engaging in an action-reflection cycle about an aspect of their own work. Central to this endeavour was the use of isiXhosa as a language of tuition, classroom discussion, and oral as well as written assessment. The presence of the Xhosa-speaking lecturer, who co-facilitated sessions with the non-Xhosa-

¹ Caroline Kerfoot, in Plüddemann (2007:15).

speaking lecturer, ensured that teachers felt free to exercise their language choice.

It was the monolingual or anglocentric habitus that the Action Research module sought to challenge. Course notes and assessment instructions were provided in both languages, as in the following extract from the assignment handout:

Research problem in context [10 marks]

Identify a problem related to language or literacy in your classroom or school, and think of a way of addressing it. Start by formulating a problem statement. Briefly describe the context in which (where, how, why, to what extent etc.) the problem arose.

Ingxaki esonjululwa lolu phando ngobunjalo bayo [10 amanqaku]

Fumanisa ingxaki enxulumene nolwimi okanye ukufunda nokubhala kwigumbi lakho lokufundisela okanye kwisikolo sakho, ze ucinge ngendlela ongahlangabezana ngayo nayo. Qalisa ngokuthi uqulunqe ingxelo ngale ngxaki. Gqabagqabaza uchaza ngentsusa (phi, njani, kutheni, inobuzaza obungakanani njalo, njalo.) apho ucingela ukuba le ngxaki ivela khona.

All the readings, however, were in English. Assessment took place via coursework in the form of a paired oral presentation in class (25%), and an individual written assignment (75%). The oral presentation was designed to form the basis for the written task.

As to the process, initial contact between students and lecturers took place over two days in April 2008, during which time key concepts and processes were workshopped and relevant video material shown and discussed. The two days ended with students doing paired oral presentations (with obligatory OHP transparencies) on any topic related to language or literacy in their own classroom or at their school. Over the course of the next few months, students were visited in their schools by one or both of the course presenters, to ensure the action research assignment was on track. These visits proved useful in clarifying the nature and scope of the assignment, in providing feedback, and generally in reassuring students. Students were given the option of submitting a draft, which half the class

managed to do. The final version was submitted towards the end of the 2nd semester. Both English and isiXhosa were used as languages of tuition. Students were given the choice of language for assessment. Half the paired oral presentations were delivered in isiXhosa, the other half in English. A similar pattern emerged for the individual written assignments, with 7 students writing in English, 7 in isiXhosa, and 1 in a bilingual combination of the two languages.

It was noticeable that those who chose to write in isiXhosa averaged a creditable 61%, while those who wrote in English achieved a mean of 67%. The bilingual assignment received 62%. While direct comparison of marks between modules is complicated by the fact that some were taught in English only, others in English mainly (with some isiXhosa), and yet others in isiXhosa mainly, there is enough evidence to suggest that the choice of assessment language in this instance benefited the weaker students. It was this group that chose to write in isiXhosa – a choice that enabled them to avoid having to deal with the double load of the content and the lesser-known language. After a detailed discussion of marking criteria, the non-Xhosa-speaking lecturer marked the English assignments and the Xhosa-speaking lecturer marked those written (wholly or in part) in isiXhosa. External moderation was done by a critically supportive native English-speaker, who was frank enough to acknowledge her limitations in isiXhosa and who recommended that someone fluent in isiXhosa should be asked to moderate the module in future.

4. Teacher Voices on African Languages

Several months after the completion of the action research module, we separately interviewed three teachers who had written their assignments in isiXhosa, either wholly or in part. Selection criteria included language choice exercised in the written assignment, as well as simple availability. The fact that the sample cannot be said to be scientific constitutes a limitation of the research. While this does not invalidate the findings, it does mean that they cannot readily be generalised beyond the cases in question.

Ms P and Ms M are Grade 5 educators at primary schools in two of Cape Town's oldest townships. Both school communities are characterised by linguistic homogeneity in that almost all learners and teachers have

isiXhosa as a home language. The schools are participants in the WCED's LTP pilot programme, which seeks to extend the use of the home language as LoLT beyond Grade 3, i.e. to move schools from an early-transitional to a late-transitional bilingual model. Ms Y, on the other hand, is a Grade 3 teacher in a multilingual school in which the isiXhosa-speaking majority were until recently deprived of the educational use of their MT in a straight-for-English immersion model, partly because half the teaching staff were Afrikaans- and/or English- (and non-Xhosa-) speaking. In 2007 the school, inspired by language transformation, introduced a parallel isiXhosa MT stream in one of the Grade 1 classes, which by 2009 had moved up to Grade 3; and a greater proportion of teachers now are Xhosa-speaking. Ms Y has been instrumental in ongoing efforts at revising the school's language policy and securing a MT-based education, a process that has entailed considerable advocacy in the school community. A key factor has been a series of meetings addressed by teachers, community leaders and even the provincial education minister, in which parents were enabled to shift away from an English-only orientation.

The interview questions posed to the three teachers centred on having written the assignment in isiXhosa: the reasons for doing so, the challenges involved, the usefulness or otherwise of the readings, and the lessons learnt from the experience. The Xhosa-speaking lecturer, who had played a supportive role in teaching the module and a key role in assessing it, did the interviews in isiXhosa.

Mother Tongue Teaching: Value and Terminology Challenges

In the first extract Ms P, who produced a very good assignment, comments on the motivating and capacitating effect of the use of isiXhosa in the ACE programme, and on its favourable impact on her own teaching.

[Ms P] 'Ndingathi le course ithe yasinceda kakhulu ekufundiseni abantwana bethu ngolwimi lwesiXhosa. Abantwana bethu bekukhe kuqala kwanzima kakhulu xa besiqala ukufundisa ngolwimi lweenkobe. Ubuye ufumanise ukuba amanye amagama kunzima kwalapha kuthi ukuwabiza. Bekuye kufuneke sithathe iincwadi ezibhalwe ngesiNgesi sizibhale sizise esiXhoseni.'

(I would say the course has helped us a lot in teaching our children in isiXhosa. At one stage it was very difficult when we began teaching in the mother tongue. You would notice that some words were difficult even for us [teachers] to pronounce [meaning they do not have isiXhosa equivalent of the words – author3]. It was necessary to take books written in English and translate them directly into isiXhosa.)

In the absence of textbooks in isiXhosa, Ms P reports that the course helped her realise MTE in her own class by encouraging her to begin translating scientific concepts while ensuring equivalence of meaning. That is to say, the programme effectively gave her the confidence to become a translator and terminology developer for educational materials, a role not envisaged by the already onerous Norms and Standards for Educators².

Providing a Metalanguage

The ACE programme also appears to have provided teachers with a metalanguage, as the following extract shows:

[Ms P] *‘Ewe ndizakutsho ndithi isivulile kuba ngamanye amaxesha ubuye uyithathe into uyititshe apha eklasini ube ungayazi ukuba yintoni na. Umzekelo ezanto ze, zegenre besizenza kodwa ube ungayazi ukuba wenza ntoni na, isincede kakhulu, satsho sakwazi ukuziqhaphela nozahlula izinto.’*

(Yes I would say it opened our eyes because sometimes we would take something and teach it without knowing what you are teaching. For example those things of genres, we were doing them without knowing. This helped us a lot, made us notice and differentiate between things.)

² The ten roles prescribed by the Norms and Standards for Educators are: mediator of learning; interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials; leader; administrator and manager; scholar; researcher and lifelong learner; community member; citizen and pastor; assessor; subject specialist.

The reference to genres is no accident, as the programme consciously used a text-based approach that drew attention to the structural and linguistic features of different text types, and highlighted the need to scaffold learning by means of simple writing frames³. The programme thus provided a discourse that gave participants the ‘aha experience’ of recognising their own work, as if for the first time.

Coping with Complex (English) Texts

Asked to comment on whether the fact that the readings were in English caused her difficulties, Ms M expresses her self with disarming frankness:

[Ms M] Ewe iye yanika ingxaki enkulu le nto kwaye nolwimi oluthe lwasetyenziswa beluntsokothile kakhulu. Ukuba besingathanga safumana la chance yokuba itolikwe, itolikelwe esiXhoseni. Nemibuzo le (Action research essay instructions) ubuye ufumanise ukuba ubungazi kukwazi ukuphendula le nto ibuzwayo ngenxa yokuntsokotha kolwimi but ngenxa yokuba icacisiwe ke ngoku uyakwazi ukuyiphendula. Mna khangela indi confusanga konke konke koko kube khona indicacela ngakumbi.

(Yes this thing [readings in English] posed a big problem and the language used was very complicated. If we were not given the chance to translate, if they had not been translated into isiXhosa... Even the questions [Action research assignment instructions] ... one was not going to be able to answer what is being asked because of the complexity of the language. But because it has been explained now one is able to answer it. The use of isiXhosa did not confuse me at all, instead it made things clearer.)

It is clear that Ms M experiences the texts as difficult and ‘very complicated’ for two distinct, yet intersecting reasons. Firstly, the texts are in English, a language in which she feels decidedly less comfortable than in her mother

³ These writing frames were taken from Lewis and Wray (1998), and Lewis and Wray (2002), and translated into isiXhosa by the Xhosa-speaking facilitator.

tongue, isiXhosa. Secondly, they are complex texts written in an academic register with which she is unfamiliar. As presenters we sought to address this language/discourse nexus by translating the assignment guide into isiXhosa, and by visiting each teacher at her school, explaining what was required (in isiXhosa and English) and checking on progress towards the assignment. Ms M leaves her interviewer in no doubt that the use of English in a context she experiences as cognitively demanding is confusing, and that it was only the fact that the explanation was in isiXhosa that cleared things up for her: 'The use of isiXhosa did not confuse me at all, instead it made things clearer.' We return to this issue in the discussion, below.

Emancipatory Effects of Mother Tongue Use

In the following extract Ms M points to the unmet expectation that the ACE programme would enact its commitment to mother tongue based bilingual education by using mainly isiXhosa as a language of tuition.

[Ms M] 'Ndingathi mna okokuqala icourse le yethu although ibiyicourse yelanguage transformation ibigxile kakhulu kwiEnglish ze sithi ke ngoku sakuba free ukuba singasebenzisa ulwimi lwethu, then ootitshala ubuye ubone ukuba bayathakazelela. Ndathi ke mna le nto iyafana nale yenzeka apha eziklasini zethu kuba ubuye uthi the minute abantwana befundiswa ngolwimi lwabo baba free bekubonakala ke nakootitshala kuba bekuthi kwakuthiwa umntu makathethe ulwimi aluthandayo, bebethatha inxaxheba.'

(I would say to begin with: this course of ours, although it was a course on language transformation plan it was mainly in English so whenever we got a chance to be free to use our language, you would then see that teachers are enthusiastic. This is the same thing happening in our classroom: you would see the minute learners are taught in their mother tongue they become free. This was evident to the teachers as well because once it was said that a person could use a language of choice they immediately participated.)

What is noteworthy is the motivation and sense of emancipation experienced

by course participants when ‘we got the chance to be free in our language’, and the improved participation that resulted. It finds strong resonance in Ms P’s comment that ‘[n]dithe ndakwazi ukuvakalisa izimvo zam khululekileyo ulwimi lunge nguwongo umqobo endleleni yam.’ (I was able to express my views freely, language not being a stumbling block along the way.) Ms M’s reference to the parallel situation in her own primary school classroom merely confirms that the freedom to choose the language of classroom interaction, and hence of learning, is deeply appreciated by children and adult learners alike in a context in which this right has, up to now, been actively suppressed in practice.

Writing Bilingually: Constrained Language Choices

Perhaps the most revealing comment on the choice of language for the Action Research assignment comes from Ms Y, who wrote hers bilingually, alternating between English and isiXhosa sections:

[Ms Y] ‘Okokuqala titshala ndizakuthi ndibhale ngesiXhosa kuba abazali nootitshala ebe ndisebenzisana nabo ukwenza le research baye bapreferisha isiXhosa kuba iphepha mibuzo ebendilenzile bendilibhale ngazo zombini ezi lwimi isiXhosa nesiNgesi kodwa baye bonke baphendula ngesiXhosa. Kulapho ke ndiye ndaqqiba ekubeni mandithathe zonke ezanto bazibhalileyo njengoko zinjalo ndizikhuphele njengoko zinjalo kuba ukuba ndizibhala ngesiNgesi iyakuphuma iyenye into ingeyiyo le bebeyithetha. Into ebangele ukuba ndifake isiNgesi besele ndilungiselela no[name of non-Xhosa-speaking lecturer], andifunanga kumenzela nzima kakhulu kuba kwireadings ebendizifunda bezingesiNgesi. Ndithe mandicaphule nakuzo ndingamenzeli nzima kakhulu kule yesiXhosa ukhona ke wena ukumfundela.’

(Firstly, I decided to write in isiXhosa because parents and teachers I worked with when doing this research preferred isiXhosa. Although [my] questionnaire was both in English and isiXhosa they all answered in isiXhosa. That is when I decided to write everything they wrote as is because if I had written it in English I would have a different product, it would not have been what they were saying. The reason why I included English was to cater for [name of non-Xhosa-speaking lecturer]; I did not

want to make things too difficult for him because these readings were in English. I decided to quote from them as they were; I also knew that you [author3] were there for the isiXhosa section.)

Ms Y testifies that her choice of language was determined by several factors, not all of which are made equally explicit. The first is the desire for authenticity and research integrity, in this instance by seeking to align the language in which the fieldwork was conducted with that used for writing up the research. That the parents chose to answer Ms Y's bilingual questionnaire in isiXhosa is significant in itself. In an educational context in which English is so dominant, it indicates that the monolingual habitus has been overcome; the choice of the home language represents a small moment of empowerment. While it is tempting to dismiss Ms Y's claim that 'if I had written it in English I would have a different product, it would not have been what they were saying' as misguided as it seems to negate the possibility of translation, the fact that language itself was central to the issue means that something significant may well have been lost in translation.

Secondly, Ms Y reports that her choice to use English for some sections was done partly out of consideration for the course presenter, whose lack of competence in isiXhosa is hinted at but politely left implicit. It is also an interested position, as Ms Y wanted the benefit of the more experienced lecturer's comments on her draft; her decision to quote from the readings and to discuss them in their original language (English) is thus a deliberate strategy to secure feedback. In this way Ms Y is assured of the critical attention of both lecturers, and skilfully uses their respective strengths to her advantage. Ms Y's assignment thus bears eloquent testimony to a sense of pragmatism as well as to her bilingual repertoire within the same domain.

As the above responses show, the use of isiXhosa for teaching, classroom interaction, course notes and assessment, both orally and in writing, was well received by ACE participants. It is worth pointing out, however, that teachers felt it was important to have options. People appreciated the chance of exercising a choice in the matter of the language of assessment. Those who chose isiXhosa expressed relief at being emancipated from the strictures of English to participate freely, and were empowered to perform better. This does not, of course, mean that the severe problem of teachers' poor conceptual knowledge (Taylor & Vinjevold 1999) is solved;

the change of language of tuition in itself is insufficient to guarantee a quality education. It does imply that the broadening of language of tuition options to include the mother tongue means that one barrier to epistemological access is thereby removed.

5. Conclusions

Teachers and learners alike find their voices and gain in confidence when they are able to process information and negotiate meaning in the language they know best. Being given the choice to do so represent a small victory in the struggle for mother tongue based bilingual education (MTBBE) against the background of hundreds of years of colonial practice and the marginalisation of African languages. The use of isiXhosa as a language of tuition and assessment on the ACE course signals its potential as a language of enskilling in accredited teacher development, a high-status domain traditionally reserved for English and Afrikaans. The subjective element of empowerment in the accounts reported on, above, is unmistakeable. There are clear overtones that the use of African languages in teacher education brings with it not only better cognition, but also a sense of relief at having the chance to ‘feel at home’ in a familiar language. The use of two languages in one written assignment challenges the monolingual habitus in general, and the standard language ideology in particular (cf. Stroud 2002). It also testifies to the pragmatic ‘readiness for action’ part of language attitudes (Baker 1992), and has definite potential in a multilingual environment in which most teachers speak an African language first whereas most texts are still in English.

In the context of the WCED’s Language Transformation Plan, the successful albeit ad-hoc use of isiXhosa in the course points to the desirability of aligning the language(s) of tuition with the language(s) teachers are expected to use in the classroom. As a WCED review (2009) of the ACE puts it,

The ACE course should model its message Some lecturers made an effort to co-teach and accepted assignments in isiXhosa. A refusal to do this can make a very powerful statement to the students about the valuing of the learner’s language.

Valorising the mother tongue in a systematic MTBBE programme is an essential, if arduous, undertaking. It will require shifts in language attitudes, changes in institutional language policies, investments in staffing (including external moderation) as well as teaching and learning resources across the curriculum – language cultivation, in short, on the levels of corpus, status and acquisition planning. While the investment in African languages at teacher training level will have to be substantial for the foreseeable future if it is to give expression to MTBBE, it has to be weighed against the ‘counterfactual’, the cost of not doing so and continuing with business as usual (Grin 2005).

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