

Language Policy and Education in South Africa: An alternative View of the Position of English and African Languages

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The Interface between Language Policies and Social Transformation

The claim that English marginalizes learners has to be seen within the complexity of language teaching and learning in a changing society. More realistically, learners who do not have an African language in South Africa are deprived of the opportunity for meaning construction within the African context that forms their life world. We argue that the problem lies more with the quality of the teaching of English. A cognitive approach to teaching ensures that we succeed in presenting English as a potentially emancipatory force in students' lives. There is no linguistic and cultural deficit among English second language learners as they have cultural capital and they have a language. No child is empty of language. Language teaching needs to be underpinned by radical and critical educational studies to ensure that it serves emancipatory interests. Freire contends that the form and context of knowledge, as well as the social practices through which it is appropriated, have to be seen as part of an ongoing struggle over what that counts as legitimate culture and forms of empowerment (Aronowitz & Giroux 1986:156).

We argue that providing English knowledge is legitimate and it empowers learners. Good command of English will aid in minimizing socio-

economic disadvantage, especially within the post-apartheid context of South Africa. However, we also acknowledge that the language issue is both sensitive and controversial and the debates are highly contested. Proponents of English as medium of instruction, like Kachru (1986:1), contend that knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp as it opens the linguistic gates of international business, technology, science, and travel as it has linguistic power. In direct opposition is Cooke's notion of English as cultural intrusion, the property of elites and the expression of the interests of the dominant classes (1988:59). Teacher educators and trainees will find it beneficial to understand the complexity of the debate and to include in the curriculum the nature of conflict (Apple 1990). Apple theorises that a significant block to transforming massified consciousness into critical consciousness is the ideology that in the pluralistic society the interests of all the groups are the same, and that policy and institutions are formed by consensus, in this case English as lingua franca (1990:87). Conflict, contradiction and resistance should be viewed as the basic driving force in society. A theory of resistance is therefore central to the development of critical educational studies. It helps to nuance the debate more carefully, understand that all language learning is political and point to the ideology underlining curricula, the reasons why some knowledge is foregrounded and others marginalised and engage critically with working class knowledge.

At the present moment, English serves as an important vehicle for socio-economic cohesion in our country. It also serves as a linguistic bridge for communication amongst black South Africans in a changing society. The reason why Nelson Mandela and subsequent African liberation leaders mostly use English in their addresses can be interpreted in different ways, including that English confers some attributes of neutrality or that the use of English is an attempt to foster the constitutionally entrenched values for an inclusive society. It can also be seen as an attempt to unify a people susceptible to be divided along ethno-linguistic lines. In a sense one can argue that English equalizes our society. Ideally, because of our location on the African continent, an African language should be playing this role and indeed, current efforts to promote African languages into higher status functions should be encouraged. However, the fact remains that at least in the foreseeable future, English will continue to be a major language in this country and the world at large. One can therefore argue that imperatives for

the foregrounding of English as language of teaching and learning should be examined so as to provide every South African child with an opportunity to master the language that might control his/her access to the means of socio-economic and educational empowerment.

It should be noted however that, for second-language speakers of English, the attainment of better mastery of English should not negatively affect their first language abilities. Teaching strategies should be found for learners to value and not reject their first language and culture yet also embrace, appropriate and claim both cultures and languages as theirs. Mother-tongue based bilingual education should aim at providing learners with good command of English, which constitutes an essential tool for success in the global arena. However, the maintenance of the learner's mother-tongue will remain an important additional pillar for success at local and national level. Therefore, the quality of the teaching of English needs to be reinforced.

Metaphors of English

The discourse about English in the South African context draws on an interesting spectrum of metaphors including the following: English as a liberator, a gatekeeper, a killer of other languages (Skutnabb-Kangas 2006; Pennycook 1994) or a colonizer of minds (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986).

Skutnabb-Kangas' view, which in essence argues that English is a killer language, have been espoused by a number of language researchers. Pennycook's notion of linguistic curtailment refers to the fact that English pushes other languages out of the way not necessarily killing them (1994:14). Pennycook's argument is relevant to the South African situation where English remains the language in which much is written and a language in which much of the visual media occur, thus curtailing the usage of other languages in spheres of power. The promotion of African languages appears to be one of the effective ways to counter the devastating negative impact suffered by African languages. Unfortunately, such a view falls short of acknowledging that English is not the only killer language. The promotion of Kiswahili in Tanzania has led to the marginalization of numerous indigenous languages. In our South African context, the dominance of isiZulu in Kwa Zulu-Natal is a result of the little discussed marginalization (quasi

disappearance) of other African indigenous dialects of the province. The issue is not necessarily the presence or absence of English but the lack of support for a particular language may result in its marginalization (disappearance). Further to this sociolinguistic argument, one can add a psycholinguistic argument which can be evidenced by the fact that language attrition can occur in any individual if he/she does not use that particular language (in writing, listening, speaking and reading).

In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing The Mind*, he argues that languages are not neutral means of communication but are also an embodiment of culture and values. He further maintains that values are the basis of people's identity (1986:5). His argument for the rejection of English lies in the fact that for him embracing the English language and thereby its culture and value system amounts to embracing a Eurocentric world view with the detrimental effect of perceiving the African languages, cultures and values as inferior (17f).

Unfortunately, this idea echoed by many other scholars throughout the world and in South Africa opposes on the one hand the English language and on the other hand the African languages as if these two blocks were easily delineable. We know that African languages are diverse and represent a diversity of moral, ethical, and aesthetic values. They also represent a diversity of cultures. Furthermore, in the African context, bilingualism and multilingualism are a normal occurrence. The link between language and culture means that most Africans are multicultural and this does not mean that one of the cultures is necessarily viewed as inferior to the other. Two or more language-cultures can coexist in a fruitful symbiosis. In the South African context, one may wonder whether being from the Xhosa ethnic group and speaking isiZulu and English amounts to mental colonisation. Our contention is that the proverbial *colonised child* is not colonised because of the language he/she uses but rather because of a lack of critical thinking. Critical thinking remains central to any decolonising enterprise. Critical thinking can use any linguistic vehicle to attain autonomy or freedom and the example of the South African liberation movement's use of English remains a case in point.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument also posits a link between language, values and identity which indeed does exist. However, identity should not be construed in the narrow sense of a single static construct. Identities are

multiple and dynamic constructs. They can be traded, exchanged and negotiated depending on the context. Learning a new language can also be considered as acquiring a new tool. Teaching English is a way of providing learners with a necessary identity kit which is essential for opening doors of opportunity in the future.

Is English a Liberator or a Gatekeeper?

English is established among individuals from a variety of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds (although less so in the rural than in the urban areas, and amongst the working class). Especially amongst the educated, English functions as a lingua franca and is a primary language of government, business and commerce. Educationally, it is a compulsory subject in all schools, and is the preferred medium of instruction in most schools and tertiary institutions (the only other medium of instruction at advanced levels at present being Afrikaans). It is firmly embedded in the fabric of South African education and society.

English was chosen as language of communication by the liberation organizations during the 'freedom struggle' and has been seen as the language of liberation and black unity (Gough 1996: xviii). It should be added however that the usefulness of English in the liberation struggle came from the fact that it was an additional medium of communication and not the only one. Many other languages were needed to ensure adequate mobilization and effective communication with the masses, the black elites, the forces of oppression and external supporters.

Today, the reality is that the high cost of multilingualism with 11 official languages is beyond the reach of South Africa. Despite the efforts of government to communicate with local populations in their own languages, English remains the only national language that allows government to function effectively. The Drum decade writers, the Soweto Poets and protest writings in popular journals like *Staffrider* used English as medium of communication. Is it because English could make their writing accessible to a larger audience? Is it because of the buying power of their targeted audience or because of their own difficulties to write creatively in their mother-tongues, themselves being products of an English-based education system? Whatever, the reasons and motives, one cannot refute the fact that even on a cultural level, English serves as the natural and arguably neutral choice.

The workplace of post-apartheid South Africa is transforming racially, culturally and linguistically to reflect our national diversity. Yet English remains the most used language for higher status occupations. This can be due to the fact that most African language speakers working as accountants, lawyers and scientists are, in fact, English mother-tongue speakers when it comes to debate on issues pertaining to their field of expertise (Mwepu 2005). It is curious that even a course like African Linguistics is taught through the medium of a foreign language i.e. English. This goes against the prediction of the 1996 National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) which suggested that it was only a matter of time before [South Africans in general and] the speakers of African languages [in particular] realised that 'English only' or 'English mainly' options were not adequate in terms of redressing the imbalances of the past (NCHE 1996:-381-385). The African Language development plan aimed at ensuring that certain courses 'which lead to regular contact with the population such as social work, nursing, law and public administration' be taught in African languages is far from being accomplished more than fourteen years later. This is in spite of attempts that are being made to teach science subjects in African languages at school level (Nomlomo 2004) and the development of terminology to support the teaching of science in indigenous languages (Jokweni 2004).

The ability of South Africans to communicate in English facilitates the evolution of a nation state. English is the language of the state and government documentation appears mostly in English. From the perspective of Bourdieu (1993) this represents cultural capital. English is therefore central to those who wish to succeed within the parameters of state-sanctioned power. Those who have good command of both English and an African language stand even a better chance of success. Yet mastery of other languages only (without English) seriously limits a person's chance of success. In the school environment, Kapp (2001) noticed that second language learners of English are enthusiastic to learn the language because of the perceived potential that English provides in terms of access to higher education, power and economic resources.

Alexander (2000) points out that unless a person has a command of standard English or of standard Afrikaans, he/she is simply eliminated from competition for jobs that are well remunerated or simply excluded from

consideration for certain positions of status and power. Although, this declaration was stated to emphasize the need to promote African languages and curtail the marginalisation of the majority (75%) of the African population, one can also see through this declaration a somewhat covert call for better teaching of English so as to provide our schooling population with a chance to acquire standard English, especially because of the intricate relationships which exist between language, schooling and economic empowerment.

In academic settings, Bangeni (2001) found that, given a choice, bilingual students would still prefer to submit their written academic essays in English rather than writing them in their indigenous languages because arguably, writing in their mother-tongue would limit their ability to utilize all the educational resources available to them.

Does English Entrench Unequal Power Relations?

It is only the intelligentsia that hold the view that the presence or dominance of English entrenches present unequal power relations. How can English not be neutral if it is the main language of the democratically elected African nationalist government, and the language of the media, commerce and industry? Is this by default or by design? The truth remains that South Africans speak a plethora of languages and it is an ill-informed viewpoint that English discriminates against the majority of the country's citizens. The state has been vociferous in entrenching the rights of indigenous languages and multilingualism in South Africa as a prerequisite for democracy. Numerous initiatives were taken in this regard, including the recruitment of multilingual frontline clerks, capable of communicating with the public indigenous languages as well as the provision of interpreting services in courts, health institutions and the parliament. Yet especially in parliament, the interpreting services are hardly used because, the majority of the Members of Parliament prefer to use English so as to give everyone direct access to the substance of their argument. In the context of the South African Parliament, the effort to address everyone in English (parliamentarians and the members of their constituencies, through the airwaves) seems to bear witness to the view that English is an equalizing linguistic vehicle. But beyond this, addressing everyone in English sometimes appears to be a sign

of courtesy, impartiality and civility in a country that uses so many languages.

The history of English in South Africa shows that this language was initially forced on people. The English Language Proclamation of 5 July 1822 unilaterally imposed English as an exclusive language for all judicial and official acts, proceedings and businesses in the colony. This policy or imposition was considered as a means of uniting the loyal subjects to their common Sovereign, the Queen of England. Giliomee laments that English was imposed even though more than 90 percent of Europeans [and probably 99% of Africans] in the Colony spoke no English (2003: 3). Notwithstanding this sad history, various other reasons have contributed to the fact that the English language has been appropriated by South Africans at national level as theirs. Moreover, any effort of unbiased language promotion should give due consideration to the fact that English indeed remains a South African language.

Theoretical Constructs of Marginalization

Integral to the process of affirmation of the language rights of learners are two factors: the ideological context of English in public schools and the theoretical constructs of marginalization/exclusion on the basis of language. Drawing from critical educational studies (Giroux, Freire, Shor and Apple) and the post-structuralist theories of Foucault, we maintain that the dichotomy between English versus mother-tongue and the resultant debates around identity politics and strategies of social engineering ignore the complexity of language teaching and learning in post-apartheid South Africa. The poststructuralist theory of language as discourse is sufficiently powerful to explain why English is far from neutral. The Foucauldian archaeological model with its genealogical approach to history, theory of power and discourses, and notion of discursive space is invaluable in a study of exclusion, especially in post-colonial contexts faced with the dichotomy between the dominant discourse (English) and the local marginalized 'other' (African languages). A genealogical study of the role of English as dominant language in South Africa will uncover the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements, decentred discourse and, reveal how discourse is secondary to systems of power (Chetty 1998:4). The

critical questions within this context is how does one promote English teaching and learning in a land where language is racially segmented, where the Eurocentric approach in the teaching of English is dominant, where major struggles were waged against language e.g. Soweto 1976, and where academics still speak of a 'high culture'. How can content in the language classroom be liberating and empowering? An appropriate intervention in language teaching is transdisciplinarity. Through its self-reflexivity it attempts not simply to accumulate knowledge but to ask what constitutes knowledge, why and how, and by whose authority, certain modes of understanding are certified as knowledge and others as non-knowledge (Zavarzadeh & Morton 1994:66). Unlike interdisciplinarity, it is a transgressive form of redrawing the map of learning in a fashion that opens up new spaces for emergent radical and revolutionary subjectivities.

Issues like authority, knowledge and power introduce to students conflicting ideologies and cultural processes. Within the South African context, it helps to counter the dangers of historical amnesia currently encouraged by processes like reconciliation and the notion of the 'rainbow-nation'. Foucault (1972:208) notes that it is the intellectual's role to struggle against the forms of power that transforms the individual into its object and instrument in the sphere of knowledge, truth, consciousness and discourse. Foucault also regards theory as practice and a struggle against power, revealing and undermining power where it is most insidious and invisible. In the English literature classroom, for example, some progress is being made in the shifting of marginalized capital to the centre in the teaching of English literature—the concept 'book' is not viewed as the starting point for literary studies since South African students are not confronted only with the printed word, but also with the oral performance, the handwritten manuscript, the pamphlets, the pictographic script of the rock paintings, the songs and folklore, rituals and ceremonies, trance dances and dreams, etc. It is a creative way of teaching English that is needed to ensure that the language can play a role in liberating the previously disadvantaged in South Africa.

The linguistic competence of African learners testifies to an elaborate and complex pattern or broader communicative competence and points to the importance of multilingualism as a resource in the South African classroom Gough (1996). It is with this in mind that the new curriculum makes provision for three languages at senior certificate level.

We disagree with the notion that the language policy operates as social exclusion. In reality, English ensures social inclusion. Although English is not the most widely spoken mother-tongue in South Africa (it is lower than isiZulu, isiXhosa and Afrikaans) it is a language of access and serves as favorable condition for success both in higher education and internationally. English does not perpetuate the privileged status of an elite class, on the contrary, English promotes structural-economic development and social inter-group and inter-personal interactions, vital components for reconciliation and growth in a new democracy. In spite of postcolonial critique by language activists, English does not regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups as South African speakers of English are not defined on the basis of language. All South Africans have access to English and an indigenous language. As such they may decide to claim any of the official languages as theirs.

Our tertiary institutions admit students who speak all the major South African languages, as well as from many African states, Asia, China, Europe and the Americas. The use of English in this context is relevant and appropriate. Students choose to learn in English and whether we interrogate the notion of English as a powerful language that is used to gain greater personal, economic, or political advantage or an appropriate language given the tower of Babel situation in our campuses. It is ultimately the choice of the students.

Most parents want their children to be taught through the medium of English. Political change has made it possible for increasing number of black people to enter the corporate and business world, established political activities and educational institutions from which they were previously excluded. As early as 1991, research in South Africa proves that significant numbers of black parents have opted for English for their children, even from the first year of primary school (NEPI 1991:13f).

Some critics however challenged the NEPI report because of the way some of the questions in that investigation were formulated. Rather than positing a dichotomy between English and African languages, the NEPI investigation should have given the parents a choice between on the one hand English as the only medium of instruction and on the other hand English and African languages. Nonetheless, any attempt to reject English as a medium of instruction may not be supported by parents. English plays a

central role in education and it is perceived as a powerful instrument against marginalization.

Developing New Attitudes to Language Teaching

Teacher training should be underpinned by critical educational studies. The focus on problem-posing in contrast to problem-solving—together with dialogical rather than ‘banking’ education is relevant for curriculum reconstruction in teacher training, especially in view of the need to address the low literacy rates. Giroux and McLaren (1991:159) maintain that critical language teaching as a form of cultural politics speaks to a form of curriculum theory and application that stresses the historical, cultural and discursive in relation to classroom materials and teaching practices. It enables teachers to examine, dismantle, analyse, deconstruct and reconstruct pedagogical practices. Teachers are empowered to ask how meaning is produced, and how power is constructed and reinforced in the classroom.

Teachers should understand language curricula as an expression of struggle and to acknowledge that it constitutes a primary agent for introducing, preparing and legitimizing forms of social life. There should be a shift from reading to writing and teachers should consider both content and methods. Humanistic methods without critical content cannot help students become subjects capable of using critical knowledge to transform their world. The experiences and social practices that students bring to the institutions (like indigenous languages and cultures) should be validated. Such experiences should form the basis of the teaching programme thus ensuring that students have an active voice in the content taught instead of the traditional approach of silencing them by ignoring their cultural capital. The challenge remains with our tertiary institutions to educate future teachers to learn to appreciate their learners’ languages, cultures and values. Such appreciation should lead to finding ways of building on the learners’ capital. Space should be created within the classroom for the learner to use his/her home language. For example, learners can be given a chance to debate a specific problem and solve it using their mother-tongue freely, then report the findings to the class in English so as to be understood by everyone. Multilingual teachers can use code switching to tap on the linguistic ability of their learners. Literature could be another site of multilingual exchange.

Unfortunately, literature teaching in language lessons remains problematic, especially when we interpret texts for students. Students' own responses are conditioned by cultural backgrounds and biases and more interpersonal factors of culture and society and certain levels of literacy competence. Strategies should be implemented to maintain the interest of the reader especially with the longer works of fiction and also to encourage reading. When the content is interesting and relevant, it motivates the student to continue reading, even if the language is difficult, the reading exercise is more successful. Local writings have a direct relevance to the students' lives. Where an intrinsic motivation to read has been developed, students will read texts regardless of factors that will facilitate their reading comprehension. Ideally, learners should be exposed to literary texts both in English and their mother-tongues. This will help to foster a culture of bi-literacy in South Africa. The challenge is therefore in the hands of government, together with publishers and other stakeholders, to stimulate the emergence of South African literatures in all the official languages.

In the interim period, English fictional classics can be translated into South African languages and vice versa. However, in the long run, South African writers will be encouraged to create a body of literature with a South African flair and capable of speaking to the nation's soul. Literature production in this country, especially literature in indigenous languages needs to be revived. Such revival may take the form of activism whereby community members meet to write, not for pecuniary reasons but as socio-political cause worth pursuing. Unless the teaching of literature in schools is also revolutionized, many students will continue to be ill-equipped for tertiary studies.

It is fiscal reasons that restrict the appointment of new language teachers to ensure the implementation of the language policy. Language policy seems to have simply moved African languages from the margin to the centre (on paper only) as a form of redress and there have been little training of African language teachers. Of serious concern is the low intake of students at foundation phase level to offer mother-tongue instruction in indigenous languages. What is needed is a concerted programme to ensure quality intake for teacher training and an effort by the state to reduce material inequities in schools as a step to attract quality teaching trainees. The quality training of language teachers is unfortunately not foregrounded

as there are more serious issues within the complexity of teacher education to be addressed.

Conceptual Linguistic Knowledge

Teacher Education institutions should conceptualise language-in-education programmes that are designed for long term solutions. There is no quick fix solution and strategy to enhance language proficiency in schools is a long term project. Integral to scholastic achievement is the emphasis on academically related aspects of language proficiency, or what Cummins (1989) labels as conceptual-linguistic knowledge. We argue for a greater accent on cognitive/academic language proficiency in the training of teachers, along with the reconceptualisation of the role of languages in teaching and learning. Language courses are limited to archaic pedagogics and consist of formal aspects of language, limited literature study and basic communication in English. The silences in these language courses include semantics and functional meaning, academic language proficiency, pragmatic aspects of proficiency, bilingualism and code-switching.

Meaning construction (Freire 1971), a theory fundamental to critical educational studies, is the basis of context-embedded teaching, especially within post-colonial contexts. The teacher has to be trained to encourage learners to negotiate meaning and interpret texts.

Training of Teachers

In her study of language and learning science in South Africa, Probyn (2006) concluded that teachers indicated a strong preference for English as the language of teaching and learning. The lack of training in teaching in second language was evident and teaching resources were limited. Teaching cannot be done in a language in which the teacher does not have an appropriate level of mastery.

The contextual frame that continues to condition English teaching in postcolonial contexts is daunting and should be addressed in teacher training:

- Pedagogy is based on European models

- The most prevalent teaching methodology is the transmission mode;
- The prescribed texts are drawn from predominantly middle class, high culture positions;
- Classrooms are characterized by a polarity between first language and second language speakers whose cultural capital is excluded;
- A culture of silence results from non-mother-tongue based learners losing confidence (Ashworth & Prinsloo 1994:125f).

A Call for Better Teaching of English

Webb (2006) attributes the non-use of African languages in education *inter alia* to the fact that in South Africa for example, the process of domination and subjugation has resulted in the perception that indigenous cultural values, beliefs and norms are inferior. Can English be taught to Africans in a way that allows space to challenge such negative perceptions? Especially, given the fact that learning English is accompanied with the tacit acquisition of the values of English. Halliday (2007) highlights the fact that there is probably no subject in the curriculum whose aims are so often formulated as those of English language yet they remain by and large ill-defined, controversial and [sometimes] obscure. A critical look at the aim of the English course in the South African context is necessary. Can English be taught in a manner that empowers speakers of indigenous languages? Can it also be taught in such a way that it facilitates the acquisition of other subjects such as mathematics? These questions can be adequately addressed if the teaching of English goes beyond the transmission of basic linguistic skills. Christie, Frances and Macken-Horarik (2007) argue that the teaching of English should go beyond basic skills to integrate issues of cultural heritage, personal growth, functional language studies, cultural studies and new literacy studies.

Conclusion

In this paper we have interrogated the controversies and (in)sensitivities of the imperatives for the foregrounding of English as language of teaching and learning. We argued that the problem lies more with the quality of the teaching of English rather than the language itself. A cognitive approach to

teaching will ensure that we succeed in presenting English as a potentially emancipatory force in students' lives.

There has been little retraining of teachers with regards to the multilingual nature of open schools (pre-1994 South African schools were largely segregated). English second language learners are marginalized and silenced in such contexts due to teacher preparation, not necessarily due to English as language of instruction.

If it is to be a 'liberator', English should be a resource to be appropriated and owned by all, not just the elite, to be used as a gateway to the wider world. For this to happen, creative solutions (and massive expenditure) would have to be applied to the teaching of English, particularly in schools where indigenous languages are the mother-tongue of learners. If well managed, mastery of English in previously disadvantaged settings may be an invaluable tool of exchange between those living in the margins of society and those who are part of the global village.

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