

## **Mother-tongue Education in South Africa**

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### **Introduction**

The question of mother-tongue education in South Africa remains a vexed one. On the one hand, it seems reasonable and desirable that learners should be able to receive education in their mother-tongue, if they so wish. On the other hand, there are some very real difficulties involved in the implementation of this ideal. The purpose of this paper is to clarify what these difficulties are, and then to suggest what needs to be done to overcome them. The intention is neither to argue for or against the notion of mother-tongue education in the South African context, nor to consider whether its implementation is practically possible, but simply to spell out what courses of action need to be undertaken if the idea is to be seriously pursued.

### **Background**

The South African Constitution guarantees learners the right to receive education in the language of their choice<sup>1</sup>. Most current research suggests that learners entering school are able to learn best through their mother-tongue, and that a second language (such as English) is more easily acquired if the learner already has a firm grasp of his/her home language. Furthermore, the poor throughput rates in South African schools at the moment, where barely a quarter of African language learners who enter the schooling system are likely to reach Matric<sup>2</sup>, seems to indicate that the current practice of using English as the initial language of learning and teaching is at least one contributing factor to this problem.

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<sup>1</sup> This right is, however, qualified by the consideration of reasonable practicability, which is defined in the Language in Education Policy of 1997 as occurring when 40 learners in a particular grade in a primary school, or 35 learners in a particular grade in a secondary school, demand to be taught in their mother tongue.

<sup>2</sup> As a number of newspapers reported, of the number of learners who entered Grade 1 in 1994 only 21.9% wrote the 2005 Matric examination. Even taking into account such factors as the repetition of grades or learners leaving to study at FET Colleges, the percentage cannot be much higher than 25%.

For some years now, educationists have proposed that African language learners should be taught in their mother-tongue for at least the first three years of school before switching over to English. More recently, the Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, speaking at a Language Policy conference at the end of 2006, intimated that this initial period of mother-tongue instruction would be extended to six years, that is, both the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3) and the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6).

If this proposal is to be taken seriously, there are a number of questions which need to be clarified and considered. The rest of this paper will be devoted to this task. These questions may be divided into four main headings, although, as will become evident, there is much overlap between them: language development, curriculum development, teacher education and school implementation.

### **Language Development**

The nine official African languages are certainly able to function as media of communication at such levels as interpersonal conversation, narrative and cultural practice. As they currently exist, however, the standard written forms of the languages have not yet been developed to the point where they are able to carry academic discourse effectively and therefore function as full-fledged languages of learning and teaching, even at the Foundation Phase. For the most part, they are based on particular rural dialects in conservative contexts, having been standardised in the nineteenth century by missionaries for such specific purposes as proselytisation, and later by the apartheid era Language Boards at least partly as a mechanism of social control. As such, these standard written forms remain in many ways archaic, limited and context-bound, and out of touch with the modern scientific world.<sup>3</sup> In addition, these standard forms are often quite different from the various dialects spoken by the actual language communities, even to the point in some cases of mutual incomprehensibility (see Schuring 1993; Herbert and Bailey 2002:59f). Nevertheless, it is axiomatic, as the Canadian linguist, William F. Mackey (1992:52), has pointed out, that “the lack of standardisation jeopardises the potential status of a language” and that a language which lacks a well-established written form cannot become empowered.

If they are to be implemented as academic languages of learning and teaching, therefore, the standard written forms need to be modernised, regularised, codified and elaborated. This entails a number of large-scale projects: the revision of the spelling and orthography rules of the languages; the elimination of dialectal variation in the writing of the languages; the enlargement of their vocabulary, especially though not only in the fields of science and technology, together with the creation of modern dictionaries; and the codification of their grammars, based on the actual current practices of their speech communities, rather than on otiose cultural norms.

It is clear that this is a very large undertaking, which will require the provision of very large resources, both material and human. Of course, in theory it can be done, and the example of Afrikaans in this country is often cited as evidence for this. It must be remembered, however, that the development of Afrikaans was made relatively easy by the fact that it emerged out of Dutch, an already fully functional scientific language; that enormous resources were made available through the National Party government; that it was fuelled by an intensely nationalistic political will; and that it was whole-heartedly supported by a community seeking exclusivity and autonomy from English. None of these conditions obtains in the case of the African languages in the present context, which makes the possibility of their development into academic languages far less certain. And it must be realised that all the investment put into the elaboration of Afrikaans would have to be increased at least ninefold if all of the official African languages are to be developed to the same degree.

It must be noted, furthermore, that the development of the indigenous languages into academic media of communication cannot be achieved merely through the endeavours of a few scholars working in isolation, however industrious and well-intentioned they may be. This technicist and artificial view of language development is plainly insufficient. Instead, what needs to occur is that the entire intellectual speech community of each language becomes actively involved in the development of the language as academic discourse by strenuously attempting to use the language to write scholarly articles, give formal lectures, present conference papers, produce textbooks and scientific manuals, and the numerous other activities which require a rigorous academic register. It is only when co-ordinated and

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<sup>3</sup> To give but two lexical examples, there is no equivalent in isiZulu for the word “hypothesis”, while in

systematic linguistic research is able to draw on, and feed back into, an actual, developing discourse of practice in a mutually enhancing relationship, that a language can begin to evolve into a functioning mode of academic and scientific expression.

After a period of some inertia, a number of projects have recently been undertaken to develop the African languages by both the university sector and the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB). These include the establishment of research centres at some universities, as well as the creation of new courses in translation and terminography. The nine African National Language Bodies (under the aegis of PanSALB) have initiated projects aimed at orthographic standardisation; lexicography and terminology development; and the promotion of literature in the indigenous languages (see, for example, Webb, Deumert and Lepota, 2005). It remains true, however, that progress has not been rapid and that a very great deal more needs to be done if the ideal of the African languages functioning fully as academic and scientific media of instruction in South Africa is to be actualised.

### **Curriculum Development**

If the African languages are to be used as languages of learning and teaching in the classroom, the first and most obvious step that must be taken is to translate the Revised National Curriculum Statement (the RNCS) into these languages. At the moment, the only subject curricula which appear in the indigenous languages are the African languages as subjects themselves. The rest are available in English and Afrikaans only. It is plainly unjustifiable to propose that subjects be taught in the African languages when the RNCS - the very basis of all subject content and methodology - is not available to teachers in the putative languages of learning and teaching.

In the Outcomes Based Education system which South Africa has adopted, there are three Learning Areas in the Foundation Phase: Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills. The subjects making up the Literacy Learning Area - the eleven official languages as subjects - are obviously written in the particular languages themselves. But the Numeracy and Life Skills Learning Areas have not yet been written in the nine African languages. Now, for this

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seSotho one term is used for the quite distinct scientific notions of “force”, “power” and “energy”.

translation to be conducted successfully, it is imperative to amplify and clarify the subject-specific terminology in the African languages, as well as to develop their capacity for generic academic discourse. Thus, it is necessary to develop the African languages as academic and scientific languages, at least to a certain level, before the Foundation Phase curriculum can be translated, and, consequently, before one can expect teachers to begin teaching the curriculum in the learners' mother tongues with any degree of consistency and precision.

In the Intermediate Phase, matters are rather more complex. Here, there are eight Learning Areas: Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Culture, Economic and Management Sciences, Life Orientation, and Technology. Moreover, within these Learning areas there may be one or more distinct subjects: for example, Natural Sciences comprises both Physical Science and Biology; Social Sciences includes both History and Geography. As is to be expected, the curriculum for these Learning Areas becomes increasingly detailed and specialised as the learner progresses through the various Grades. In consequence, the translation of the RNCS in this Phase can only proceed successfully if the African languages have been developed to a significantly higher degree as academic languages. And, at the risk of repetition, it is only once the RNCS has been translated that teachers will be able to begin teaching the various Learning Areas effectively in the African languages.

Naturally, it is not only the RNCS which must be available in the indigenous languages. All textbooks, readers, support material, teaching aids, guides and literature must be made readily accessible in these languages and kept continuously up to date. This is particularly important in the fields of mathematics, science and technology where an extensive range of new terms and phrases will have to be developed, learnt by the teachers and then communicated to the learners.

Apart from the translation of the RNCS and related learning and teaching materials, it is also essential that the curricula for the African languages themselves be revisited and revised. The content structure and methodology for the teaching of the languages remains, like the languages themselves in many ways, rooted in an outmoded and ineffective pedagogic model which hampers learning and diminishes interest. As a result, many learners emerge from the schooling system unable to write their own mother-tongue with any acceptable level of competence. Moreover, since they have often not been taught English (or Afrikaans)

successfully, they find themselves unable to communicate effectively in their second language, in either oral or written mode. While they may have attained a certain level of basic interpersonal communicative competence, they lack what Jim Cummins (2000, for example) termed cognitive academic language proficiency, and thus they are unprepared for higher education or for training in a sophisticated work environment.

At this point, it is necessary to make a distinction between employing the African languages as authentic media of instruction throughout the curriculum and using the languages in the classroom in an informal, ad hoc manner in some or other form of code-switching. Given the diverse linguistic profiles of many South African classrooms, together with learners' limited grasp of English, it is inevitable that teachers will resort to a mixture of languages for purposes of clarification and explication. In such contexts, code-switching is frequently a vital and indispensable pedagogical tool. Nevertheless, if the goal is to develop the African languages into genuine academic languages, and have teachers use them as such, then code-switching cannot be viewed as anything more than a partial and transitional support mechanism. This becomes ever more apparent as learners move into the Intermediate Phase and beyond, where increasing emphasis is placed on independent reading and writing skills. Learners who remain reliant on mixed-language modes of communication will find it extremely difficult to read texts written in the standard form of a particular language, as well as to write essays and assignments and to answer tests and examinations. Furthermore, given the highly context-specific, personal and arbitrary nature of code-switching, it is impossible to construct generally comprehensible and enduring academic texts in a mixed-language format. Thus, while code-switching practices currently play an important role in many South African classroom environments, they can never be construed as constituting a target language of acquisition, or as representing a viable alternative to the development of formal academic proficiency in the standard form of a language.

It ought to be clear from the foregoing discussion just how much work needs to be done in order for teachers even to begin teaching the first six Grades of school in the indigenous languages. To suggest that such teaching could begin imminently, and to propose rapid policy changes to this effect, is both disingenuous and irresponsible.

## **Teacher Education**

In addition to language and curriculum development, a crucial aspect of providing mother-tongue education in South Africa lies in the field of teacher education (or teacher training as it used rather inelegantly to be termed). In the early years of this decade the responsibility for teacher education was transferred from the former colleges of education to the universities. During the same period, the numbers of students enrolling for African language courses at universities dwindled, for various reasons, to almost nothing. Even in Teacher Education programmes where an African language is a compulsory credit, the number of students who proceed with the study of an African language beyond the obligatory first level course is negligible. There is, as a result, a real crisis in African language teacher supply.

As a first step in addressing this crisis, it is essential that the government offer service contract bursaries for student teachers specialising in African languages. In this scheme, students receive a full bursary (covering tuition, board and living expenses), but then have to pay the bursary back through a year of service for every year of study in which they received the bursary. Over the past few years, such bursaries have been offered for Maths and Science students only. In 2006, however, the Minister of Education announced that such bursaries would be extended to students specialising in Technology and Languages (both African languages and English). It is gratifying to note that this service-linked bursary scheme, which teacher education institutions have been demanding for some time, has begun to be implemented in 2007, through the Fundza Lushaka project (see Metcalfe 2007). It remains to be seen, however, whether sufficient numbers of student teachers will enrol for and graduate in African language courses, and then whether the Department of Education has the capacity to ensure that they do actually take up African language teaching posts in the schools.

Even this is not enough, however. Incentives must be provided for graduating teachers to accept employment in the rural areas and township schools where the need for teachers qualified to teach in the African students' mother tongues is most needed. Such incentives could take the form of higher salary packages, performance bonuses and better promotional opportunities. If this does not happen, the current trend of successful black education graduates taking posts in private schools or government schools in the affluent suburban areas will continue.

Here it is necessary to remember that the issue is not merely that of teaching the African languages as subjects, but rather the ability to use the African languages as the media of instruction for the entire curriculum. For student teachers to be empowered to achieve this goal, a number of further steps need to be taken. Firstly, as with the African language school curriculum, the African language curriculum at tertiary level needs to be drastically revised and modernised, so that students are enabled to study and learn these languages as effective carriers of academic discourse. Secondly, the entire Teacher Education curriculum (or at the very least the undergraduate Bachelor of Education programme) needs to be translated into each of the African languages. This would include all the official school subjects, but most especially Mathematics and the Sciences. As was noted in the first section of this paper, however, for this to be made possible the languages themselves need to be significantly developed. Thirdly, it will be necessary to provide a very large number of new Teacher Education lecturers who are able to teach the newly translated curriculum in the medium of the African languages. At the moment, a very small percentage of university teacher educators are able to provide quality tertiary tuition through the African students' mother tongues, and even fewer in the scientific subjects. Finally, for the requisite development and continuous upgrading of mother tongue tuition at tertiary level to be possible, it is necessary for high level research to be conducted. Thus, optimally, each university's Faculty or School of Education would need to attract and support top quality education researchers working specifically in the field of African languages in education, whether through research units, centres of excellence or individual fellowships, grants or professorial chairs.

In addition to the training of pre-service student teachers, it will also be necessary to upgrade the competence levels of teachers already in the system. Universities will have to provide a range of additional courses for in-service teachers so that they are able to acquire academic proficiency in the newly-developed African languages as well as enhanced methodological skills in utilising the languages as media of instruction in all the various Learning Areas. Such courses would, of necessity, need to be taught part-time (after hours, during the vacations, or as block-release programmes) which would place an enormous burden on both the schools and the universities, and would again require a heavy investment on the part of the State in terms of additional lecturing staff, tuition and transportation costs, and perhaps even temporary teacher-replacements. Such courses would also by their very nature have to be completed over an extended period of time and would thus require a strong commitment

on the part of both lecturers and teachers over and above the normal duties which they have to perform in an already highly pressurised work environment.

As was the case with language and curriculum development, it is evident that for all of this to become possible, the State will have to make extremely heavy investments in human and material resources far beyond the provision of the limited number of student bursaries it currently offers. Whether the State budget for education can or will ever be enlarged to meet all of these multiple costs remains unclear.

### **Implementation in the Schools**

The fourth aspect of mother tongue education involves its actual implementation in the schools. Even assuming that at some point in the future the African languages have been effectively developed, that the curriculum has been efficiently translated, and that a full quota of properly trained teachers is available, there is still the question of whether schools will adopt the policy and implement it thoroughly. For this to take place, a number of stakeholders will have to be convinced of the broad benefits of mother-tongue education, not merely in a cognitive sense, but in a much larger socio-economic context. Such stakeholders include government education officials, school governing bodies, principals, teachers, and, most importantly, parents and learners. If learners and their parents do not actively desire mother-tongue instruction, then all the effort in the world will not make the policy viable. And for this desire to be inculcated, parents and their children will have to see that mother-tongue education leads to palpable benefits in such spheres as economic empowerment, social mobility and influence, and pathways to further academic opportunities. All of this raises questions of the instrumental value of the African languages in South African society more generally which, though of interest and importance, lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

A more specific question related to mother-tongue education in schools concerns the role of English. No matter how rapidly or to what degree the African languages are developed, it is safe to assume that English will continue to occupy a role of crucial importance in South Africa for the foreseeable future. Even if the African languages are utilised as languages of learning and teaching in the first years of school, at some point there will have to be a switch

to English as the medium of instruction, whether this takes place after three years, or, as is now proposed, after six years. Thus, English will have to receive systematic and sustained attention, and will have to be taught extremely effectively as a subject during the initial years of schooling so that when the transition does take place (be it gradually or immediately) learners will be sufficiently competent in the language to be able to cope with learning through it. Indeed, even if mother-tongue education were one day to be employed right through to Matric level, learners would still need to be proficient in English for the purposes of higher education where, in a globalised academic environment, English is indispensable. At the moment, however, English is, in many cases, badly taught in South African schools. Just as important as the production of large numbers of competent mother-tongue teachers, therefore, is the development of high quality teachers of English who can be deployed in the rural and township schools. Again, a system of service-linked, contract bursaries and incentives to work in areas of greatest need must be implemented immediately for student teachers specialising in the teaching of English. The Minister of Education, as mentioned previously, has included English in the list of priority subjects for student teachers, and this is to be welcomed as a long overdue practical measure. But, as in the case of African language teaching, steps must be taken, over and above this, to ensure the upgrading of in-service teachers in terms of academic proficiency in the language, content knowledge and improved methodological practice. It is a simple truism that any educational system which prioritises the African languages at the expense of English is destined to fail at the levels both of practical reality and educational theory. As even so avid a proponent of heritage languages as Tove Skutnabb-Kangas has observed, in multilingual societies it is essential that all learners are enabled to "learn enough of the power language to be able to influence the society or, especially, to acquire a common language with other subordinated groups, a shared medium of communication and analysis" (1981:128).

In the best of all possible worlds, learners, especially in areas where English is rarely used, would begin their schooling in their mother-tongue and then at some point switch over to English as the medium of instruction, having acquired enough English through subject study to be able to cope with it. At the same time, they would continue to study their home languages as subjects in a model of additive bilingualism. Conversely, in areas where English is able to be used as the language of learning and teaching from the outset, it is just as important that learners acquire proficiency in at least one official African language. In schools where Afrikaans is the medium of instruction, it is not unreasonable to require that in

addition to their mother-tongue, Afrikaans-speaking learners acquire both English (as they invariably wish to do anyway) and an African language.

From this it ought to be apparent that there can be no single language policy which would suit every school context in South Africa. The society simply remains too disparate and differentiated for any “one size fits all” system to be practicable or even desirable.<sup>4</sup> What is not unfair to expect, however, is that by the time learners leave school they will all have full academic proficiency in at least one language (for the moment this would continue to be English or Afrikaans) as well as some degree of academic proficiency in one and perhaps two other official South African languages.

However, even within this ideal linguistic scenario, there are some possibly unexpected and certainly ironic implications. For schools seriously to implement initial mother-tongue instruction (followed later by English) means that schools would have to be divided into particular language groupings, and learners would have to attend a school offering their particular language. While this does happen informally to a certain degree, a formalised policy would in effect return South Africa (at least in the primary schools) to a kind of linguistic apartheid reminiscent of a former era. Even in the unlikely event of township schools being able to offer parallel medium education in two or more African languages, there would still effectively exist a language apartheid between the various classes within the school. It is not clear whether the current proponents of mother-tongue education in this country have thought through these matters with sufficient care.

Finally, there remains the question of individual choice, and this brings the present discussion full circle. In any democracy parental (and learner) choice is paramount, especially when it comes to such issues as the language in which a child is to receive his or her education. It is no small matter that this right is enshrined in the Constitution. If, after all is said and done, parents continue to insist, as the majority currently does,<sup>5</sup> that their children be educated in

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Baker (2006:215f) provides a typology of bilingual education in which ten main models, each with multitudinous sub-varieties, are discussed. Which of these models would be best for any particular South African school is a complex matter, and is clearly best left to each specific School Governing Body to decide.

<sup>5</sup> This is borne out by the FutureFact 2006 survey, which reveals that, “apart from the Afrikaans community, between 60%-67% of all other language groups feel that English is the preferred language for education”. Indeed, of the remaining 33%-40% of the sample, less than 20% preferred mother-tongue education (at whatever level); the remainder stating no preference. In addition to this, 82% of the sample claimed to be able to read and understand English, and, again apart from the

English rather than their mother-tongue, then the onus rests on the State to ensure that this is provided as effectively as possible for everyone who wants it. And if this does indeed continue to be the will of the majority, then the State must take far more active and extensive steps to improve the teaching and learning of English in South African schools than has hitherto been the case. No language in education policy which is forced on the majority against its will can ever succeed, and will serve only to perpetuate the unequal and inefficient conditions which currently exist in South African education.

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Afrikaans community, between 72%-77% of all other language groups believe that English should be the main official language of South Africa.

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