

# **The role of language in assessment and education: Challenges faced by African learners in the South African schools**

**Mr Siphamandla Nxumalo, UMALUSI, South Africa: siphamandla@umalusi.org.za**

## **Abstract**

*Researchers and language experts argue that thorough development of a child's language skill is a reliable predictor of future cognitive competence. The paper attempts to illuminate the dilemma faced by the learners both in the rural/township and desegregated schools.*

*The paper brings to the fore the dilemma faced by African children in desegregated schools, who do not only learn in English, which is their second language, but who must also relinquish their cultural heritage in order to fit in the culture of the schools. This is due to the aversion to African languages demonstrated by the reluctance to embrace Black indigenous languages in these schools.*

*The paper also argues that while the children in the township and rural schools face challenges associated with learning in the second language, their counterparts in the former White schools may be obtaining proficiency in English due to the exposure to the language, this is however at the expense of their home languages. These children are at the risk of losing proficiency in their own languages. The tendency is that they are unable to either read or write in their own languages, furthermore, they speak their vernacular languages imperfectly.*

*Lastly, the paper concludes by highlighting briefly the steps that have been taken by the Department of Basic Education in mitigating these language challenges and recommendations thereof.*

## **Key words:**

- African languages
- Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT)
- Desegregated schools

## **1. Introduction**

Researchers and language experts argue that thorough development of a child's language skill is a reliable predictor of future cognitive competence. The paper attempts to illuminate the dilemma faced by the learners both in the rural/township and desegregated schools (former White schools/former Model C schools).

The paper attempts to bring to the fore the dilemma faced by African children in desegregated schools, who do not only learn in English, which is their second language, but who must also relinquish their cultural heritage in order to fit in the culture of the schools. This is due to the aversion to African languages demonstrated by the reluctance to embrace Black indigenous languages in these schools.

This paper is premised on Mugane's (2006) concepts of linguistic strandedness, linguistic orientalism and linguistic incarceration. According to Mugane:

*Linguistic strandedness* is characterised by those who speak only one language, but are socialised into the culture of another.

*Linguistic orientalism* treats indigenous African languages as a modern day Towers of Babel and these languages are said to be an anathema to efficiency, progress, and ultimately the environment.

*Linguistic incarceration* is characterised by the sidelining of African languages from educational and institutional developments in modern Africa. The traditional black school is shut down by the incarceration of black languages and black folk are forced to pay attention in languages they do not speak for the most part, much less understand.

The paper argues that while the children in the township and rural schools face challenges associated with learning in the second language, their counterparts in the desegregated schools may be obtaining proficiency in English due to the exposure to the language, this is however at the expense of their home languages. These children are at the risk of losing proficiency in their own languages. The tendency is that they are unable to either read or write in their own languages, furthermore, they speak their vernacular languages imperfectly. As noted by Mugane (2006), these children have a receptive understanding of their parental language, in extreme cases never utter a word in it, for instance, there are many children who respond to requests by their parents without replying in their parental tongue.

Lastly, the paper concludes by highlighting briefly the steps that have been taken by the Department of Basic Education in mitigating these language challenges and recommendations thereof.

## **2. Background**

Language is one of the major challenges in assessment and curriculum implementation, not particularly in South Africa, but in the whole continent of Africa. This problem has its roots in the colonial period where the colonists imposed their language on their subjects. Linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) was thus entrenched whereby favourable characteristics were attributed to a particular language whilst devaluing other languages. Mugane (2006) refers to this as language shift, which he describes as about conquest, where there is a conqueror and the conquered. The conqueror being the one being the one whose language is adopted, while the latter is the one who assimilate.

Language was one of the important tools that were used by the apartheid government in South Africa to propagate its segregationist policies. This period saw English and Afrikaans being elevated to the only official languages in the country, while Black languages were stigmatised and relegated to insignificant and undeveloped languages.

In its review of the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement, the Department of Basic Education asserts that the thorough development of a child's language skill is a reliable predictor of future cognitive competence (Department of Basic Education, 2009). Furthermore, it concedes that crucial attention needs to be paid to issues of language, in particular First Additional Language (FAL), English, which remains a strong predictor of student success at school. The Ministerial Task Team thus made a recommendation that English First Additional Language be

included as the fourth subject in the Foundation phase. This would help address the problem of insufficient English language proficiency by the end of Grade 3 for learners to make the transition to English as language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in Grade 4.

### 3. Statement of the problem

Different researchers and academics have argued that language particularly English, which becomes the LoLT from Grade 4, is a major obstacle towards learner's achievement. For the purpose of this paper I will divide provision of schooling in South Africa into two categories. One category is that of rural and township schools and the other one comprises desegregated schools. For rural and township schools where children share a home language with teachers, switching to English as LoLT in Grade 4 provides a barrier to learning because in most cases, English language skills in these learners have not developed adequately for them to understand what is being taught in class.

On the other hand, desegregated schools use only English for learning and teaching. While the policy stipulates that learning and teaching should be in Home Language (HL) from Grade 1 to 3, for African learners in these schools, this is not the case. This limited exposure to vernacular language puts them at risk of losing proficiency in their own language owing to aversion of these schools to African languages (Vandeyar, 2005). This is what Mugena (2006) refers to as linguistic incarceration. The majority of these schools are not willing to offer African language as a subject even at First Additional level, instead they offer English as HL and Afrikaans as FAL, both of which are foreign to African learners. As a result these children end up not being fluent in their home language and can barely read or write in their own languages.

Several reasons have been advanced by different researchers for the aversion, among others, are those advanced by Makalela (2005) that:

- many of the African languages are not developed, so they cannot be used in education;
- costs of developing African languages are very high; and
- their exclusive use will block the window to the world and result in exclusion from participation in the international community.

The above reasons are vehemently disputed by Maake (2014). Maake resents the fact that South Africans whose mother tongue is not English are confident in affirming the supremacy of English over their languages, hence a preference for English as the medium of instruction despite the right accorded by section 29 (2) of the Constitution: "Everyone has the right to receive education in the language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable." The most vilified Bantu education was according to Maake, "ironically and inadvertently in line with the notion of teaching a child in his or her mother tongue." This he advances because during Bantu education all subjects were taught in mother tongue from Sub A to Standard 6, while English and Afrikaans were taught as subjects.

#### **4. Legislative framework governing the status of languages in South Africa**

Post-apartheid period was characterised by the crafting of various legislation and policies that sought to address and redress the past inequalities. These have a huge bearing on the teaching of languages in South Africa. These are:

- The Constitution
- The National Education Policy Act
- The Language in Education Policy
- The South African Schools Act
- Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)

##### *The Constitution*

According to the South African Constitution:

- all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.
- The Bill of Rights enshrined in the Constitution stipulates that everyone has the rights to receive education in the official language(s) of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable.

##### *The National Education Policy Act*

The National Education Policy Act of 1996 provides for the following:

- Advancement and protection of the fundamental rights of every person.
- Every person to use language and participate in the cultural life of his or her choice within an education institution.

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

It compels the Department of Education to:

- Promote multilingualism
- Develop the official South African languages equitably
- Foster respect for all languages used in the country
- Develop programmes for the redress of previously disadvantaged languages.

##### *The South African Schools Act*

The Act gives the School Governing Body (SGB) authority to determine the language of learning and teaching.

##### *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)*

According to this document learners are required to offer two compulsory official languages, one at home language level and the other at First Additional level. One of the principles of the CAPS promotes valuing indigenous knowledge systems by acknowledging the rich history and heritage of this country as important contributors to nurturing the values contained in the Constitution.

## **5. Proposed solutions to the Language of Learning (LOLT) problem**

As a possible solution to the medium of instruction complexities, Kapp and Arend (2011), Alexander (1989) and Pylman (2012) argue in favour of a gradual transition model for South Africa. Kapp and Arend regard the early switch to English by African language learners combined with poor teaching as a reason for not being able to develop the cognitive academic language proficiency skills needed to deal with advanced levels of literacy and abstract concepts in either home language or English. Alexander attributes the attrition rate in Matric to the language question and suggests that home language be adopted or promote additive bilingual approach to schooling. Pylman argues that proficiency in English in the absence of mother tongue instruction was negatively related to achievements in Mathematics.

Heugh (2000) asserts that until learning materials are available in all the learning areas from Grade 1-12 in all eleven official languages and until matriculation can be written in all these languages, there will be no equality of education in South Africa. Heugh proposes massive in-service training for teachers to equip them with bilingual teaching skills and an adequate grasp of English for teaching purposes.

## **6. Trends and patterns in the literature on language of learning and teaching**

One of the techniques that are widely used by teachers in teaching and learning is code-switching. This strategy is widely employed in contexts where teachers share a home language with the learners. Different reasons are advanced by different researchers for the adoption of this strategy. Some researchers portray it as a valuable strategy used by teachers to mediate learning particularly in situations where learners have limited proficiency in the language of learning and teaching (Addendorf, 1993; Setati et al., 2002; Brock-Utne, 2005).

Studies conducted on language use reveal that the strategy was used extensively for teaching and learning where second language is used as a language of teaching and learning. These studies reveal that teachers who shared the same home language with their learners used code-switching extensively in their teaching, to facilitate learning and understanding as well as make up for the learners' inefficiencies (Adler, 1998; Addendorff, 1993; Probyn, 2001). The general tendency is that in conditions where the teacher shared a home language with the learners, most of the teaching was done in that home language, thus making it an unofficial medium of instruction (Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2003; Setati and Adler, 2000; Setati et al., 2002). An interesting finding by Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir (2003) was that translation slowed down the lesson as the learners did not pay attention to the language spoken by the teacher since they knew that the information would be repeated in their vernacular language.

Other researchers regard code-switching as a coping strategy which teachers adopt to conceal their own linguistic deficiencies (Arthur, 1996). The use by teachers of the home language when teaching when the language of instruction should be English,

was according Holmarsdottir (2003) because teachers' English language skills had not developed to a level which would enable them to use it as a medium of instruction

Qorro (2003:188) suggested that in order to eliminate learners' exposure to their teachers' at times wrong use of English, English should not be used as LoLT in Tanzania and that the teaching of English as a subject needed improvement. Similar arguments have also been raised in South Africa, particularly in the rural and township schools where teachers share a home language with the learners and where there are incongruities between the language the child understands, the language of the parent and the language of schooling (Mugane, 2006). In the township and rural schools this gives rise to a situation in which both the teacher and the child do not have command of the language of instruction.

## **7. Language compensation and the role it played in the mitigation of language challenges**

In an attempt to mitigate the challenges of learning in the second language, Umalusi instituted language compensation in Grade 12, the last grade in schooling. This was introduced as an interim measure pending the improvement in the teaching and learning of English FAL.

In terms of this practice, a 5% compensation on non-language subjects was awarded to the Matric candidates whose first language was neither Afrikaans nor English, and who did not take either Afrikaans or English as a subject at Home Language level. Proponents of language compensation argue that those candidates qualifying for the compensation did indeed face a significant language disadvantage in the relevant subjects (Taylor, 2012).

Umalusi asserted that a 5% language compensation should not be understood crudely as merely giving all the candidates extra 5% over and above the marks that they obtained. For example a learner who obtained a mark of zero (0) out of 300 would obtain 5% of zero (which is zero) for language compensation; a learner who obtained 10 out of 300 would receive 5% of 10, which is 0,5 marks, for language compensation; a learner who obtained 100 out of 300 marks would obtain an additional 5 marks for language compensation. It was thereafter not the case that some learners obtained a bonus of 5% in the exam results (Umalusi, 2010).

But, does language compensation have an impact on the matric pass rate? According to Taylor's (2012) simulation exercise, using 2010 results as an example, the following conclusion was reached:

*"After the language compensation had been awarded, the pass rate was calculated to be 65.54%, however before language compensation, the pass rate was calculated to be 61.92%. The simulation thus demonstrates that removing the language compensation would lead to an estimated drop in the pass rate of about 3.6 percentage points. Expressed in terms of numbers, 20 332 candidates that passed in 2010 would not have passed if it were not for the language compensation"* (Taylor, 2012:28).

The Council has abolished language compensation with effect from 2014.

## **8. Recent developments in the teaching and learning of languages.**

Presently African languages are only used as LoLT in the Foundation phase. Thereafter they are learned as subjects either at HL or FAL level. The majority of learners have elected to use English as LoLT from Grade 4 onwards thus being taught and assessed in a language that is not their own. There is also a number of learners who do not offer their home language as a subject at all.

With the abolition of language compensation by the Council and in response to the language challenges, the Department of Basic Education (2013) has put mechanisms in place to improve the teaching and learning of languages. These are:

- English across the Curriculum Strategy
- Incremental Introduction of African languages
- English First Additional Language Grades 1-3.

English across the Curriculum Strategy is aimed at improving the teaching of English as a subject as well as LoLT so that learners can fully participate in society and the economy through equitable and meaningful access to education as well as to support their general conceptual growth. This strategy will also assist in alleviating the effects of the abolition of language compensation by the Council.

Incremental introduction of African Languages among others, assists to redress the previously advantaged languages, promote social cohesion and expansion of opportunities for the development of African languages as a significant part of preserving heritage and cultures. It also aims at ensuring that all non-African home language speakers speak an African language thus promoting social cohesion (Department of Basic Education, 2013:8).

In order to strengthen LoLT in the General Education and Training (GET) band and to ensure smooth transition for learners who choose English as LoLT as from Grade 4, from 2012 all children intending to learn through the medium of English began instruction in this language from Grade 1 level.

## **9. Conclusion from the findings**

The following conclusions are drawn from the study:

- English was identified as a barrier to learning for those children who were first taught in vernacular and had to switch to English as LoLT in Grade 4 due to poor grounding in English and lack of language skills at this point.
- Teachers are aware that English should be the language of learning from Grade 4, but are forced to code-switch and translate into vernacular language in order to assist learners in understanding the content.
- Desegregated schools are starting to open their curricula to African languages; such schools need to be supported by the DBE and School Governing Bodies (SGBs). However because of the proliferation of African languages in a province like Gauteng, it is not possible for these schools to provide for all 9 African languages.

They will therefore provide on the basis of the popularity of these African languages in their respective schools.

- While the desegregated schools are making way for African languages into their curricula, they still harbour some scepticisms and doubts surrounding the implementation of African languages. The perception borne by a majority of Whites is that any African language in the school curriculum is there to replace Afrikaans.
- Not all candidates who were eligible for language compensation actually benefited from this concession. African candidates in desegregated schools for instance, who are not necessarily English HL speakers but had to take English at Home Language level in the absence of an African language did not receive language compensation.
- The department of basic education has put mechanisms in place to address teaching and learning of the languages as well as the introduction of African languages as LoLT in all South African schools.

## **10. Recommendations**

- Suitably qualified and proficient English language teachers should be employed at the foundation phase to help learners acquire solid grounding in English so that they do not experience problems when they have to switch to English in Grade 4. The pronouncement by the DBE to offer English FAL as a subject from Grade 1 is a step in the right direction.
- More resources should be channelled towards the improvement of the teaching and learning of English FAL as a subject.
- Desegregated schools should be encouraged and supported in making provision for African languages in their school curricula from the foundation phase.
- Efforts should be accelerated in providing education, in all eleven official languages.
- There should be a de facto equality among all the eleven official languages. Currently languages are only equal on paper but in practice English is still the dominant language in education.
- The department of basic education should be commended for the initiatives to address teaching and learning of languages as well as the introduction of African languages as LoLT in South African schools.

## **Conclusion**

The paper sought to illuminate the problem faced by African learners in the South African schools as a result of being taught and assessed in the second language.



Learners in the desegregated schools are at the risk of losing proficiency in their vernacular languages owing to the over emphasis of English and aversion by some of these schools to African languages. In the same breath, learners in the rural and township schools are also unable to attain proficiency in the language of learning and teaching (English) owing to little exposure to the language. For learners in the rural and township schools the introduction of English FAL as a subject from Grade 1 will provide a panacea to the problems associated with lack of proficiency in the LoLT. For learners in the desegregated schools, so that they also have a good command of their vernacular languages, these schools should be encouraged to introduce African languages alongside English and Afrikaans. The bold measures introduced by the Department of Basic Education to improve the teaching and learning of languages including African languages will ensure parity of all official languages in the country..

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