LANGUAGE OF EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA
Prof RV Gabela

ABSTRACT

The language of education is a debated policy and management issue in the current discourse on education in South Africa. Central to this debate is the problem of learner competence in the use of English as the principal medium of instruction, as well as the quality of teaching and learning achievable The current national policy treats the issue of language medium with great circumspection. Section 29 of the National Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) provides for one's right to receive education in one's chosen language. But the education-specific policy on language lays emphasis on teaching, use and promotion of all official languages, through what is described as additive multi-lingualism.

Mother tongue is universally acknowledged as a most effective way to function cognitively and socially. This is a truism and a pedagogical precept on which a country's policy should be based. With regard to South Africa there are certain factors which have contributed to the dominance of English as the language of education. This paper examines the policy framework, debate and challenges regarding the medium of instruction. It explores the views and observations of school heads on the status of English; the problems experienced by teachers and learners with regard to the language medium in question, and adequacy or otherwise of resourcing English as a school subject. Based on this analysis, the author makes recommendations on the use and teaching of English at school.

INTRODUCTION

The language of education is a debated policy and management issue in the current discourse on education in South Africa. Central to this debate are the language(s) of choice; problems experienced by some learners and teachers in the use of English as the principal or most preferred medium of instruction, and the quality of learning and teaching achievable. The language debate has been extended to tertiary education, wherein English and communication skills are regarded as a critical success factors(Cele, 2001; Dalvit et. al., 2005). This explains, at least in part, why for a number of years certain universities have implemented what have been known as academic support programmes for students who are designated as under-prepared or disadvantaged. Although the language of education is as much an issue at university as it is at school

level, this paper focuses on pre-tertiary schooling as the locus of debate. Given the legacy of language diversity and the current language debate, what is the national policy on language of education? What problems and challenges are associated with the choice of the medium of instruction? What are the views and observations of educators on the status of the languages of the school curriculum? It is to these questions that this paper seeks to respond. But before these questions are attended to, it would be necessary for one to give a characterisation of the people of South Africa and their languages.

PEOPLE AND LANGUAGES OF SOUTH AFRICA

The people of South Africa consist of four main groups, namely, Africans, Indians, Coloureds and whites. In the days apartheid rule the distinction between who was white and who was something else, was a major determinant of one's life chances and status ascription in a racially stratified society. This fact accounted for indices of political, social, economic and educational deprivation which affected the population group most acutely on the bottom rung of the racial ladder (Wood and Harcourt, 1988; Cross and Chisholm, 1990; Gabela, 1990).

The numerically dominant group of South Africans consists of African indigenes who speak a total of nine languages, namely, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. Historically the indigenous languages have been part of the curriculum in African schools. Geographically they reflect a pattern of distribution and concentration among the nine provinces But their status and use as media of instruction were undermined by racial and linguistic discrimination on the one hand and predominance of English and Afrikaans as languages of business and power on the other hand. There is also a group of original African inhabitants, who have a history of nomadic life and are identified as Qoi (or Khoi), Nama and San. Their languages, which are noted for a preponderance of click sounds (x, q and c), are currently represented by inscription on the national coat of arms.

The second largest population group is that of whites. The whites are regarded as descendants of the colonialist population from Europe and Britain. This group consists of speakers of English and Afrikaans languages, both of which were exclusive official languages of the apartheid republic and compulsory languages of the school curricula for all racial groups. The third population group is called 'Coloured', a term used to denote the product of racial inter-mixture. As a rule this group speaks either English or Afrikaans as mother tongue or additional language.

The fourth major group of South Africans is the Indian population. Most of the Indians are the descendants of indentured labour, which was imported for the plantation economy in the 1860s. An additional group of immigrants was made up of small-time traders. Historically Indians have been regarded as a homogeneous group, although culturally they are an extremely complex population group. They are known to have brought at least five languages with them, namely, Gujerati, Hindi, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu. But English has become their common medium of communication in the public and work places, as well as at schools and in some households.

The dominance of English and prominence of Afrikaans should be viewed against the phases through which South Africa has passed, from the period of white rule to inauguration of a democratic state. South Africa evolved from a dominion status under the British over-lordship to a racially configured republic with a racially constructed system of education. The first phase (1910 – 1947) was characterised by consolidation of economic and political power in the hands of the two ethnic groups, the English and Afrikaners. During this period South Africa's national education policy focused mainly on the interests of the white minority. Education for other racial groups was left to the discretion of religious organisations and willing provincial administrations (Hartshorne, 1993; Christie, 1996). English became the dominant language of education.

The second phase of white rule (1948 – 1990) set in when the Afrikaner Nationalist Party came to power. This period was marked by a comprehensive and rigorous programme of racial containment, segregated settlements and institutionalised inequalities, amidst

opposition, repression and internecine warfare. The government's implementation of 'apartheid' or racially segregated education was coupled with assiduous ideologisation of Afrikaner identity and enforced use of Afrikaans as a school subject and an alternative medium of instruction. These measures issued in a contentious and coercive policy of multi-lingualism for African schools. As a means of show-casing the 'grandeur' of apartheid, the Nationalist Party government established and monitored a homeland system of self-rule for the Africans in designated geographical areas, and a tricameral, albeit white-controlled, parliamentary system to accommodate service delivery for the Indian and Coloured population groups.

The era of white rule was concluded when the South African government announced its intention to endorse majority rule. At the beginning of 1990 the government decided to unban restricted and prohibited political organisation, some of which had been exiled. This step was followed by multilateral negotiation for the new constitutional settlement. The first democratic elections were held in April 1994. For the last thirteen years the new democracy has had to tackle the challenges posed by the education system it has inherited: a fragmented, inadequate and racially based system of education, and language-in-education policy, which has been replete with tensions, contradictions and irritations.

CURRENT LANGUAGE POLICY

The concept of language of education as used in this paper is synonymous with medium of instruction. This term refers to the language used for teaching the formal curriculum of the education system (DoE, 2000). But there may be one or more media of instruction, depending on the need and/or access to languages, including mother tongue. According to UNESCO (DoE, 2005: 11), mother tongue is

> the language(s) that one has learnt first; the language(s) one identifies with or is identified as a native speaker of by others; the language(s) one knows best and the language one uses most.

Mother tongue is universally acknowledged as a most effective way to function cognitively and socially (Moreosole, 1998: Klerk, 2002). Being a medium of self-expression, it is a vital instrument in the performance of an intellectual task, be it in

examination, interview debate or reporting. This is a reality and a pedagogical imperative on which a country's policy of mother tongue instruction would be based. Apart from improving language competence in the first language, mother tongue instruction could contribute to achievement in other subject areas and training in a second language (UNESCO, 2003). But successful implementation of a policy of mother tongue instruction is contingent upon historical and contextual factors of a given environment. South Africa is not an exception to this.

The foregoing characterisation of the people and languages in South Africa alludes to historical, political and pragmatic factors, which have conduced to the preference for, and dominance of, English as the language of education. Regardless of the provisions of the national constitution and/or education-specific language policy, it would take a crusade of immense proportions to elevate an alternative language to the status currently enjoyed by English, including its paradoxical eminence as the language of public administration, parliamentary debates and the business sector, as well as the medium in the language debate itself. Notwithstanding the argument that effective learning could be achieved more readily through the use of mother tongue, many an African parent, from grassroots level, regards learning through the English medium and resultant language competence as a weightier pedagogical imperative, and its attainment, a treasured educational acquisition (Gabela, 1999; Klerk, 2002; Plüddemann, 2002).

During the last thirteen years the country has witnessed the unfolding of a transformation agenda in the field of educational generally, including the vexed question of language policy. In the founding provisions of the national constitution (Act 108 of 1996) concern is expressed about the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages and the need to take measures to elevate their status and advance their use. The constitution designates nine languages together with two languages spoken by whites, as official languages of the republic. According to Section 6(3) of the constitution, the national government and provincial governments may use any particular official language for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional

circumstances and the balance of needs and preferences of the national population as a whole, or in the province concerned.

There are at least two issues inherent in the language provisions of the national constitution, namely, parity of esteem and equity of treatment. Parity of esteem means that constitutional recognition of eleven official languages grants them an equal status. With regard to schooling it means that each language could serve as the medium of instruction. In this regard Section 29(2) of the constitution provides for citizens to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public education institutions, where that education is reasonably practicable. The same provision is contained in Section 4(a)(v) of the National Education Policy Act (Act 27 of 1996). Equity of treatment means that special measures have to be devised to protect and advance languages which have been disadvantaged or marginalised. In this regard a national body, called Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), has been established by legislation (Act 59 of 1995) amongst other things, to create conditions for, and promote the development of, all official languages, as well as the Qoi (or Khoi), San and Nama languages. Since its establishment, Pan SALB has initiated a number language development projects, including researching and compilation of mono-lingual dictionaries for indigenous languages.

The policy framework provided by pieces of legislation referred to above could be considered as the enabling environment for the development and/or adoption of indigenous languages as media of instruction. But the right to choose the language of education is vested in the individual learner. The South African Schools Act (Act o84 of 1996) guides the implementation of this right and empowers the governance structures, called School Governing Bodies, to determine the language policy of each school. A given the strong preference for English as the medium of instruction, it is unlikely that the existing policy framework will change the situation in the short term. It has also been observed that there are certain preconditions for effectiveness of mother tongue instruction. Such conditions include an appropriate terminology for education purposes, sufficient resource materials, adequately trained teachers available and willingness of

learners, parents and educators (DoE, 2005; Dalvit et. al., 2005). These factors seem to suggest that the elevation of an indigenous language to the status of the medium of instruction is a multi-faceted and complex national task.

Another important piece of legislation is the Language in Education Policy (DoE, 1997). This policy endorses multi-lingualism as a precept and a defining characteristic of being South African. It provides that all learners shall offer at least one approved language as a subject in grades 1 and 2. From grade 3 onwards all learners shall offer their language of learning and teaching and at least one additional language as subjects. It has been noted that there are two approaches to multi-lingualism (DoE, 1997). One approach entails teaching through one medium and learning additional language(s). Another approach is found in dual-medium programmes, also known as 'two-way immersion'. Whichever route is followed, the policy intent is additive multi-lingualism, namely, maintenance of home language and provision of access to, and effective acquisition of, additional languages. Built into this language policy is the strategic intent to facilitate communication across the barriers of colour, language and region, while at the same time creating an environment in which respect for languages other than one's own would be encouraged (DoE, 1997).

DEBATING THE LANGUAGE OF EDUCATION

The 2001 Census placed the South African population at 45 million (44819778). About 80% of this figure (or 35416166) was constituted of Africans. At the time of the census nine official indigenous languages were spoken as first home languages by 78%. English was spoken as first home language by 8%. These figures show clearly that the first language speakers of English constitute a fragile minority. But the current attraction of English as the language of education should be attributed to factors other than the number or influence of native speakers of the language. In recent years there has been a dramatic shift to desegregated English medium schools. The historically advantaged or better recourced schools in the formerly white, Coloured and Indian suburbs have been associated with the higher quality education which is accessible through the English

medium. The freedom of choice has been reflected in the bussing of African learners from deficit-ridden historically rural surroundings or African 'township' areas.

The language policy as articulated neither illuminates nor undermines the primacy of English as the language of success and global interaction. This policy commits the Department of Education to promoting the development of official languages and respect for all languages in the country. Cele (2001:187) extols the hegemonic position of English and counters the language policy as typifying lack of political will:

> Language policy in education should grant English its full status as the language that
> links up the diversity fabric of our rainbow nation.

Whilst he acknowledges the problems attendant to teaching, learning and mastery of the English language at the historically African schools, Cele argues that the current language policy is bound to arrest human development and reinforce class inequalities and segregation in education It should be noted that language policy, like other policies, establishes the universe within which specific and pragmatic choices have to be made and actions taken to gratify shared needs. Given the fact that policy is posited as a confluence of value premises, it would not be prudent for the policy maker to legislate on the language of instruction and, in particular, to undermine the languages of the political and numerical majority.

One of the issues of debate relates to take-off in the implementation of multi-lingualism as a policy imperative. It has been observed that the implementation of additive bilingualism would require adequate linguistic development in mother tongue, whilst the second language is systematically added (Bloch, 2002; Heugh, 2002). This precept of incremental bilingualism is consistent with the requirements of the language policy and could contribute to proficiency in both languages(Heugh, 2002; Mohlala and Grey, 2005). But the question of language medium becomes crucial as schooling progresses.

The language medium has become more contentious as one looks beyond foundation schooling. Part of the debate is on the adequacy or otherwise of African languages as tools of communication. African languages are perceived to have been under-developed

and stigmatised by the politics of apartheid (Moreosole, 1998; Cele 2001; Plüddemann, 2002). Their use is, therefore, associated with inferior education. A counterpoint to this perception is that problems of receiving education through a foreign medium are equally daunting (Moreosole, 1998; Maphalala, 1999; Plüddemann, 2002; Dalvit, et. al., 2005, Uys et. al., 2007).

The use of English as the medium of instruction is beset with problems of low proficiency of some teachers for whom English is an additional language (Plüddemann, 2002; Gabela, 2005; Uys et. al., 2007). This situation may be compounded by the background of learners who need extraordinary support. Most children in South Africa live in rural areas. Their regular use of English is limited to the school environment, the concepts of a given subject and the knowledge taught (Gabela, 1999; Maphalala, 1999; Dalvit et. al., 2007). The recent reports by chief examiners and chief markers of grade twelve examination papers (KZNE, 2006) identify a number of shortcomings which account for low scores across subjects.

These limitations include the following:

- Lack of subject terminology
- Poor language usage
- Lack of vocabulary
- Misunderstanding questions/instructions

- Difficulty in expressing oneself
- Misspelling of words
- Failure to answer high-order questions
- Poor reading and comprehension skills

Although the listed defaults have been mentioned without specific examples they are illustrative of the learners' problem in dealing with the language of instruction, the subject terminology and the curriculum content.

EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

The author of this paper carried out a snapshot empirical investigation on language of institution at selected historically African schools in one of the most populous and deeply rural provinces in the country. A qualitative approach was used for data collection. This

approach was deemed appropriate as it seeks to reveal typical ways in which things happen, as well as provides for tapping on rich and expressive insights of respondents. The data were collected by means of a semi-structured interview schedule. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and became the primary source of analysis.

A purposive sample was used for this paper. Eight school principals were selected, three from secondary schools and five from primary schools. This selection took proportional distribution of school categories into account. The respondents consisted of five female and three male principals all of whom had or more years of experience as school heads. Although three out of eight selected schools are located in the peri-urban area, the bulk of enrolment is drawn from the rural surroundings. The focus of this investigation was on implementation of language policy, disposition of learners, teachers and parents towards English as medium of instruction; problems experienced in the use of chosen medium of instruction, and teaching of English as a subject in the school curriculum.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

As indicated above, four themes have emerged from empirical investigation, as sketched hereunder.

Implementation of language policy

There appears to be a shared understanding of the requirements of language policy. All eight schools have implemented the policy as articulated by the organs of state. The secondary schools have opted for the English medium as has been the case before the new policy came into being. The language medium, has been selected by the school governance structure, in consultation with the parent communities. The primary schools have complied with the precept of additive bilingualism, which involves isiZulu and English. Mother tongue instruction has been decided upon in respect of grades 1 to 3, whilst English has been selected as the medium for grades 4 to 7. The implementation of

the new policy has led to virtual abolition of Afrikaans as a school subject and a regional language option. This development seems to negate the broader concept of multi-lingualism, as contemplated in the national policy. It also raises questions regarding feasibility of comparable multi-lingualism in respect of historically white schools, with a tradition of Afrikaans anÿÿEnglish as lan pages of the school curriculum.

Choice of English as medium

The interviews have established that preference for English as the language medium is based on the perception of this language as a tool of success in business, post-school education, employment and global interaction. Whilst this perception is shared by parents and teachers, the principals have reported on ambivalence among teachers and learners. This ambivalence is shown in informal discussions and formal classroom interaction. Some teachers may resort to code-switching for adequate self-expression, or for assisting learners to achieve a better understanding of the subject matter. According to school principals the attitude towards the use of English ranges from negative to very positive and enthusiastic. Perhaps inherent in this attitude is acknowledgement of the policy requirement that official languages should enjoy parity of esteem and equity of treatment. If a language such as isiZulu, is to be accorded parity of esteem and equity of treatment, it is logical that it be used, to some degree and in a creative sort of way,, as a resource to enrich or illuminate the subject matter.

Problems in the use of English

Low proficiency in the use of English by teachers has been highlighted by all principals. This problem has been identified as poor self-expression and inadequate explanation, both of which issue in code-switching and code-mixing. One of the indictments on the education system, which is still a challenge to the new democracy, is the legacy of under-

resourcing of schools. This legacy has had a negative impact on the product of schooling and the quality of students enrolling for teacher education programmes. In the face of limited resources and absence of effective academic support programmes, some of the student teachers who graduate enter the schooling system somewhat under-prepared. It is in this context that teacher competence in the use of English should be understood.

Some of the teachers, particularly in the primary schools, are either uncertificated practitioners or holders of less than adequate teachers' certificates. Both categories are the target of teacher up-grading programme, called the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE). The problems experienced by teachers with regard to the use of English have a bearing on the quality of the learning processes and outcomes, including language learning and application. With regard to learner behaviour the principals identified the problems of background, lack of parental support and inadequate exposure to the English language, including lack of literary activities, such as extra reading, discussions, supervised studies or other learning sessions beyond class work.

English as a school subject

Apart from being the medium of instruction, English features as a school subject at various levels. The principals have reported that at the foundation phase the teaching of English is the responsibility of the class teacher. Beyond this level English is taught by assigned specialist teachers. Secondly, beyond the foundation phase two languages, namely; isiZulu and English, constitute the standard language component of the school curriculum in the target school system. The teaching of English as a subject sustains its use as a medium. This fact highlights the significance of the content to be taught, the approaches to be used, the depth and breadth of treatment and the kind of material to be used. The principals have acknowledged availability of source materials, which they regard as inadequate for the needs of the learners. A question was posed on the

availability of subject advisory services as from fieldwork officers According to the principals, the schools do not enjoy these services, although advisors are reported to exist In essence what the school system would require is two types of teachers, prepared and certificated from the teacher education institutions. The first group is for language educators who are solid and enterprising practitioners. The second group is for content subject teachers, who are competent users of the English language. This should be an area for inclusive debate, action research and policy advice.

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