The Language Challenge in the classroom: a serious shift in thinking and action is needed

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The challenge

Most learners in South African schools face a language barrier in the classroom. Any child who cannot use the language which he/she is most familiar with (usually the home language), is disadvantaged and unlikely to perform to the best of his/her ability. But it is not just being able to use an effective communication medium in the learning situation that is at stake. A child's self confidence and sense of self in society are undermined if the home language cannot be used for learning, and these are further undermined by the experience of repeated underachievement. This disadvantage has cognitive, psychological, social and cultural aspects, all manifested in the ongoing failure of our education system.

A three-dimensional vision

What do we want from our education system? We surely want to make it possible for all our learners to perform to their full potential and for our national ratings to be competitive. But to achieve national excellence of this kind, equity is an imperative[1]; we cannot have a system which favours some groups and disadvantages others. And we need a third dimension to our vision. Should we be separating children from each other in separate schools, or even in separate streams, on the basis of their language group? Without social integration in the classroom, the social cohesion necessary for us to move forward as a country will be unattainable. Thus whatever we do in education needs a vision with at least three dimensions — a high level of scholastic achievement, fairness to all and the promotion of social cohesion.

Multi-bilingualism as an alternative

There have to be alternatives to the academically ineffective, inequitable and socially divisive ways in which our system is currently addressing language. The Home-Language Project is piloting an approach, which we have called multi-bilingualism in a large state primary school in Johannesburg with eight or more home languages per grade. Its aim is for every child to develop two working languages — the common classroom medium (English in our case) and the child's particular home language (any of ten). Thereafter it is concerned with how all these

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home languages (HLs) can be used alongside each other to support the common language, even where the teacher is monolingual.

The bilingualism most of us are familiar with revolves around the teaching of two languages as subjects, with only one of these being used as a communication medium (the language of learning and teaching – LoLT). A multi-bilingual approach, on the other hand, treats the home language (HL) as a support LoLT across the curriculum, with many HLs being able to play this role. It breaks away from the assumption that there can be only one LoLT in a classroom[2]. I will elaborate on its practicalities after looking at some aspects of current language practice that need critical attention.

The three-year mother-tongue policy and the switch to English-only in grade 4

Current policy prefers children to have the first three years of schooling in their mother-tongue (HL), but an increasing number of schools and parents are ignoring this and opting for English as the LoLT from grade 1. Where the three-year policy is in fact being implemented, the quality of teaching is in most cases badly compromised by weak pedagogy and a lack of learning materials in the HL. But in any case, in grade 4 all such learners are confronted with a switch to English as the only LoLT, while their English and Afrikaans-speaking counterparts simply continue using their own language from grade 1 to grade 12. This is gross inequity.

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A solid body of research[3], over many years, tells us that a second-language needs six to eight years of well-resourced teaching before it can be successfully used as a medium of teaching and learning. Yet our system ignores this and the grade 4 transition to English-only continues year after year in the face of damning performance indicators.

A task team commissioned in July 2009 by Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga, to advise on the implementation of our national curriculum, highlights this transition as a critical problem area, but simply recommends that English be introduced earlier (in grade 1), alongside the HL, to facilitate the transition. Learning two languages from early on is indeed a sensible option but, despite the research referred to above, the report implies that a small amount of English over three years should be sufficient for the switch to English-only. The Western Cape Education Department (WCED) on the other hand, recently acknowledged the need for considerably more HL as a medium, to allow concepts to be taught effectively through a language children understand while at the same time giving them double the time (six years) to prepare their English for the transition.

Multi-bilingualism gives every child their own pair of languages, with no need to drop the support of the HL in grade 4 or even grade 7. It can be maintained as a resource throughout schooling, for all groups of learners and not only for the previously advantaged.

Social Separation: Language as a source of division or social cohesion?

In multilingual Gauteng, our system has remained shackled to apartheid-era township schools which separate children on the basis of HL and keep them spatially divided until high school. This is seen as necessary in order to follow the

**Distribution of the population by language most often spoken at home
Proportion of total population %**
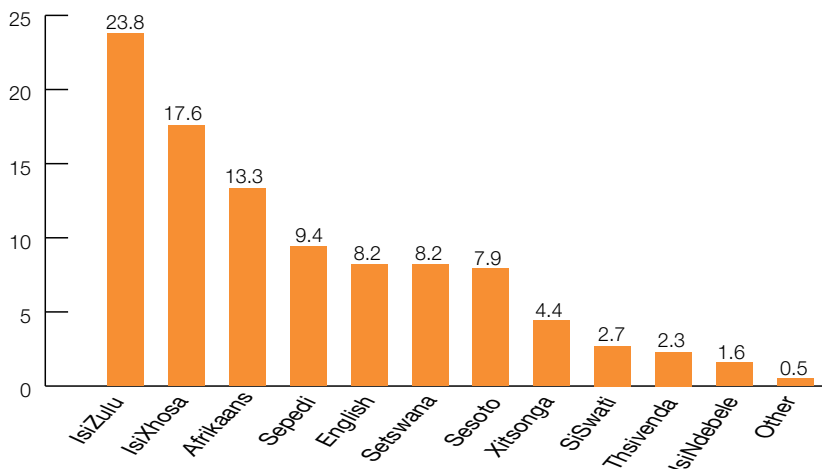
Source: Stats SA, Population Census 2001

(inadequate) three-year mother tongue policy. We also have a situation where school governing bodies can decide to keep Afrikaans as the only LoLT, in effect barring black learners seeking English as a medium[4]. And a major weakness in the WCED's six-year HL policy, is that it too easily leads to the separation of children into what amounts to ethnic groups.

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All HLs have a part in the learning process and, importantly, everyone can also claim "ownership" of the common language. Where this language is English, it can "belong" to the Afrikaans- and the Tshivenda-speaking child alike, as much as it can be said to "belong" to the English first-language speaker. All support-languages (HLs) can be treated equally and we have the chance to shake off what has developed over time into an inequitable hierarchy in the way our languages are resourced and perceived. Some separation is required to teach HLs "as subjects" effectively, especially for grade 1's and 2's to acquire the foundations of HL literacy, but this involves a small number of periods in the week. From grade 3 onwards, separation can be further reduced if language families (e.g. Nguni) can share a HL-as-subject classroom without compromising the teaching of the individual languages[5].

English-medium former model-C schools have avoided the separation problem by using a common language. The result is a unifying mix of HLs in every classroom but as long as they remain unused as a resource, equity and academic excellence will still be unattainable.

The use of English as a single language of learning and teaching

Parents and the public, commonly believe that simply using English as the LoLT will result in the child learning good English. The reality is very different. And it will take

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more than improved pedagogy to change this, because without a firm linguistic foundation in the HL, the majority of African-language students learning through English will only score between 20% and 40% in English by the time they reach Grade 12[6]. This lack of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in the LoLT makes very heavy weather of learning, particularly in subjects like mathematics and science. It is no wonder that in the last decade, fewer than 2% of students who are first language speakers of an African language have gained a university entrance pass in either of these two subjects, or that fewer than 30% of pupils who start school achieve any kind of Grade 12 certificate. On the other hand, we have intriguing examples of good mathematics results coming from poorly resourced rural schools[7], where undoubtedly the unofficial oral use of the HL alongside English is a facilitating factor (but unfortunately without the attention to text that could make for the acquisition of academic English at the same time).
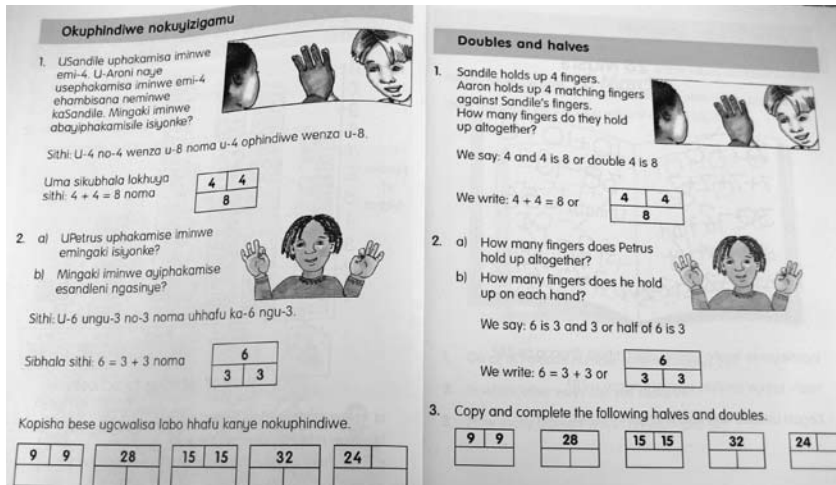
But there are other problems attached to the single second-language medium which are also damaging. In their eagerness for the child to learn good English, parents easily fall into the trap of suppressing the HL in the home, when in fact it needs to be actively promoted to remain vibrant in the face of an environment that says "only English is cool". Parents only become aware of the costs of language suppression when the implications for communication within the broader family structure become evident and uneasy questions about identity and inferiority surface. If self esteem and self confidence are undermined, this again contributes to academic disadvantage.

The Minister's task team repeatedly points out how critical it is to improve the teaching of English, for it to play its cross-curricular role effectively. But what the report does not address, is the need for a strong foundation of cognitive and academic development in the HL to provide the stepping stones for learning a second language (in this case English) and to play the "scaffolding" role needed to assist in the transfer of knowledge to this language[8]. Multi-bilingualism can provide the framework for this interaction between the languages.

Multi-Bilingualism in the classroom: How does it work?

In the first place, a multi-bilingual approach makes it possible for every learner to use the HL orally in the classroom via same-language peer interaction, alongside the common language. Together with a same-language partner, he/she can use the HL to discuss explanations and to think through how to tackle problems. After introducing the activity in the common language, the teacher determines how and when HL learner-talk is used and then wraps up the learning points for all in the common language. This puts a powerful teaching tool into the hands of a teacher faced with 11 or more languages, and who is herself/himself probably monolingual. And what is vitally important, is that by engaging learners in this way, the teacher moves beyond the constraints of teacher-centred methodology and makes good use of peers as well as all their languages as extra learning resources in the classroom. Non-official languages can also be used like this, as long as the learner has a similar-language partner.

No extra teachers are required and a classroom is easily organised to make it possible for this kind of learner-talk to take place. It is currently being successfully demonstrated in numeracy lessons for large (40 +) multilingual classes of Foundation Phase children and it can be introduced anywhere at any time for the learning of any subject. The primary school model requires every child to have a Language Buddy and systematically supports the oral use of the HL in this way as part of everyday

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A grade 2 parallel language mathematics text book: "Maths For All".

teaching. In the secondary school, a more flexible application of the model leaves the choice to the bilingual learner as to how to use his/her two languages most effectively[10].

But multi-bilingualism can be geared up significantly if parallel-language texts can be provided. Our pilot study is using parallel readers (books are identical except for the language) and parallel-language mathematics textbooks (each book has double text). This gives language-partners a text base for their learner-talk and the teacher a further means to manage it effectively. It also gives teachers the material to explicitly address the development of subject-specific vocabulary. The two languages can systematically reinforce each other. The interface between them becomes clearer and the skills to move correctly from one to the other follow. The ability to engage with texts to find meaning is more easily taught and the skills of independent learning at the heart of excellent education, takes root. The learner is freed from the limitations of teacher-based oral learning which are particularly evident where teachers rely heavily on code-switching practices.

To use text-based material in this way, children first have to be taught to read in both their languages. This is a challenge where there are more languages in the class than are currently being taught as subjects in the school. Some extra teachers will need to be deployed, unless the school can slot into a "district" support network for sharing language teachers. This kind of support should be in existence to make it possible to respect every child's constitutional right to offer his/her own language as a subject for Grade 12. This right is currently being ignored[11].

The state of indigenous languages: are they ready?

But how ready are our African languages to play their part? Languages organically develop new words and ways with words as the need arises. This ongoing process is disrupted by a decision not to use a language for educational purposes, or to restrict its use to a few years in primary school. However, given the opportunity, languages will naturally resume their development via discourse. Where terminology development is driven by subject experts and teachers and backed up by professional linguists and translators, lost ground can be made up steadily and efficiently. The work that has been done at the University of Limpopo in

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Photographer: Margie Owen-Smith

Children with parallel readers.

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developing the first SA Bilingual Degree course (in English and Sesotho sa Laboa) is instructive in this respect[12]. There is no need to hold back bilingual education while this is going on. Most words in an average undergraduate text (probably > 85%) are in any case ordinary words with current equivalents in all our African languages. We just need a clear vision and a facilitating strategy to release our hobbled languages and breathe new life into our university language departments, our publishing industry and the job market for writers and translators.

Can we afford multi-bilingualism?

Fear of costs is behind much of the reluctance to think differently about language issues. Immediate affordability is obviously a concern during an economic downturn even if the medium-term payoffs might be clear. Multi-bilingualism will require some additional financing but this should not be presented as prohibitive before being properly investigated.

For complex multilingual areas like Gauteng, a system of sharing language specialists among groups of schools for the teaching of HL literacy and HLs as subjects, has already been piloted and found to be practical and cost-effective[13]. The introduction of multi-bilingualism will involve a content shift in training for in-service teachers but this type of training is an ongoing exercise and a recurrent expense in any education system. Multi-bilingualism needs textbooks and the Minister's task team has pointed out the "crucial" need to bring back good textbooks into our system. If we have to buy new books in any case, this is an excellent time to be introducing parallel-language books. They can be expected to cost more, but a study on the costs of bilingualism estimates the additional cost of both books and teacher training to be less than 1% of our entire education budget[14]. Parallel-language books of the type being used in our mathematics pilot study only require double text — the cover, illustrations, diagrams and figures do not need to be duplicated.

Multi-bilingualism demands multilingual libraries. But any educational system aspiring to excellence requires adequate library facilities, so the major library

backlog that has been allowed to develop has to be addressed anyway. A mobile system along Japanese lines, demonstrated in our country by the Mobile Library Project, could provide a cost-effective and affordable solution in a relatively short space of time. There is also scope for sharing costs in linking school libraries into national and community library networks.

The *"Toxic Mix"* and the *"Education Roadmap"*

"The Toxic Mix"[15], lays out the failure of our current education system very clearly, along with the depth and complexity of its causes and enormous social, political and economic implications. It is a stirring and very necessary call for action on the part of every citizen and every one of our institutions — in government, business and civil society.

However, it brushes aside issues of language, not recognising them either as roadblocks or as part of the solution. It reasons that, unlike the case of early Afrikaans, the "mobilisation for other-tongue social movements" is too low to provide the impetus for these languages to have similar potential for development. It cites the lack of materials in indigenous languages as limiting the redress called for by our Constitution.

This brush-off stems firstly from a view of language as a "human rights" issue only, rather than as an issue of "resources" and academic disadvantage in the first instance. It also ignores the body of international research around language that shows our current use of a second-language as the sole educational medium to be academically unsound. Thirdly, it rests on an intuitive fear of costs which is not grounded either in research, or in a costing of our current system which takes into account either the cost of its failures or the poor return on our present high investment (by international standards) in education.

The recent *"Education Roadmap"* exercise, co-ordinated by the Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA), has been hugely valuable in throwing open the debate on issues in education to all concerned and successfully highlighting the role of education in national development. It has also produced a set of very useful and sensible points around which to focus our plans and efforts. But it makes no mention of language.

We can make our current system work a whole lot better simply by ensuring that we have teachers in our classrooms, actually teaching and able to use good textbooks and sound teaching methodologies. But without meeting our language challenge, we will still be left with a system which is fundamentally flawed, unable to reach our academic goals, inherently inequitable and a source of division rather than social cohesion. A system which perpetuates disadvantage for the majority of learners, disadvantages everyone.

Multi-bilingualism as an approach for the classroom has already been shown to be sufficiently viable to warrant serious consideration in any complex multilingual situation. It is being developed on the initiative of a handful of school governing bodies and is dependent on donor funding. This indicates another need — a proper place for research and development in our education system, to develop and activate new thinking in response to serious challenges.

NOTES

1   Dr. Mamphela Ramphele in *"Our house is on fire"* M&G Sept 11-17, 2009.

2   Where the common language and the HL are the same (e.g. for first-language English speakers where English is the common language, or in rural areas with genuinely monolingual communities), a simple bilingual model would be appropriate, provided that any shift to using the second language as the main medium retains the use of the HL as a support medium.

3   Heugh, K. (2005) *Optimising Learning and Education in Africa – the Language Factor.* Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA, DGTZ, UNESCO). Working Document (draft 22/07/2005 chapter 3: 73-76). This provides an excellent overview of a body of international research with a particular focus on Africa.

4   Hoërskool Ermelo case. (2009) The Constitutional Court confirmed the SGB's legal right to choose the medium of the school, but reminded the school of their obligation to take the needs of the broader community into consideration. The school continues as single-medium Afrikaans. The SGB has stated its intention to review its policy but it appears to have been left to its own time-frames and its own criteria.

5   This is being tested by the Home-Language Project

6   Heugh K. In ADEA report above (chapter 3: 76-78)

7   Centre for Development and Enterprise (2004). Research report no: 13.

8   Cummins, J. (1984, 2000), Ramirez et al. (1991), Thomas and Collier (2002)

9   Owen-Smith, M. Unpublished findings of the Home-Language Project.

10 Setati, M, Molefe, T, Langa, M. (2008) *Pythagoras* (No 67, June, 14-25) Using Language as a transparent resource in the teaching and learning of mathematics in a Grade 11 multilingual classroom.

11 Watson, P & Pienaar, M. (2007) *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* (Vol 25 issue 4).

12 Ramani, E, Kekana, T, Modiba, M and Joseph, M. (2007) *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* (Vol 25 issue 2).

13 Owen-Smith, M. Unpublished findings of the Home-Language Project.

14 Vawda, A and Patrinos, H. (1999) *International Journal of Educational Development* (Vol 19 187-199)

15 Bloch, G. (2009) *The Toxic Mix.* Tafelberg