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Complexities Compounding the Debate Concerning English as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) in South African schools

P. D. Khanyile

University of Zululand, Private Bag X1001, KwaDlangezwa 3886, Republic of South Africa

Telephone: (27) 035 9026752, (27) 0726457901

E-mail: KhanyileP@unizulu.ac.za

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University of Zululand, Private Bag X1001, KwaDlangezwa 3886, Republic of South Africa

Telephone: (27) 035 9026752, (27) 0726457901

E-mail: KhanyileP@unizulu.ac.za

KEYWORDS Complexities English as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) Home-language Education Model C Schools NPDE (National Professional Diploma in Education) part-time student teachers

ABSTRACT The question of challenges caused by English as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is a thorny issue in South Africa. Scholars advocate the return to home-language education in African languages, but they neglect attitudes and perceptions that catapulted English to its current status. In this study, both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were used to obtain information from respondents. The study was conducted in District Municipalities of Zululand, Uthungulu and Mkhanyakude in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and in the research, participants were given questionnaires. The study was orientated in an interpretive paradigm, using questionnaires and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Books, journal articles and stand-alone reports on the subject of mother tongue education were reviewed. The main finding of the study is that parents want schools which can expose their children to English, committed teachers and good facilities whilst avoiding ill-disciplined schools with easy access to drugs.

INTRODUCTION

A cross-section of the field of language education reveals that very little research has been conducted on the challenges compounding the debate concerning English as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) and Home-Language Education in South Africa. Scientific studies on this research problem are not yet available. The dearth of literature on this research problem is itself an indication that research has to be done in order to provide more insight and improved approaches to this issue. This study seeks to fill this gap, and it is in this regard that the current research is deemed as an exploratory enterprise in South Africa.

There are various challenges caused by English as a language of learning and teaching in South African schools. Many scholars advocate the return to home-language education in African languages, but they neglect attitudes and perceptions that catapulted English to its current status.

This article reports on a study in which quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used to obtain information from the NPDE in-service students in their capacity as parents.

For this purpose, in the first section of this study, the background to the study is provided, the subsequent sections present the motivation, problem statement, research objectives, research methodology, data analysis and results,. Finally, in the last section, the implications of the findings are outlined..

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Language, including LoLT, is a contentious issue in South Africa. This is due to its history as South Africa was first a Dutch colony as from 1652, and then in 1795 it fell under British control (Lass, 1995). The military conflict was inevitably extended to the linguistic terrain and it was not going to last for a few years. Whilst the Dutch occupation had only concentrated on the Cape, the British occupation targeted the whole country. The discovery of diamonds and gold in 1866 and 1892, respectively, fuelled this quest for colonial expansion (Davenport, 1991:40; Hobson, 1902; Hixson, 2008).

The British campaign was further spurred by the rise of the Christian missionary spirit. The missionary converted the Africans and built churches and schools in the villages. This trend had not been visible during the Dutch era. The core curriculum of the Missionary school comprised rudimentary literacy in the vernacular, functional numeracy and thorough grounding in the

Queen's language as Africans were now British subjects. In this situation, English became a widely spoken language in South Africa, whilst Dutch was pushed to the periphery. English assumed the status of "a language that can take you anywhere" (Virasamy, 1997) whilst Pakir (1998:104) called it "a language with no sell-by-date attached to it." (Sen, 2005, 285 – 287; Gandhi, 2008, 463)

In the absence of any books in African languages the missionary schools relied on books in English. This had a dual purpose: it solved the scarcity of books in African languages and it hastened the grand plan of colonization of Africans as English became the language of the educated African elite comprising teachers, nurses, civil servants and clerics.

After the Anglo-Boer War (which is now known as the South African War 1899 – 1902) there was a surge of Afrikanerdom that culminated in Afrikaans becoming an official language together with English. The Afrikaans-medium universities of Stellenbosch and Pretoria were established alongside those of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Natal. The medium of instruction was English and Afrikaans, respectively. During this struggle between English and Afrikaans, the missionary schools continued using English as the medium of instruction. After the Second World War the Nationalist Party came to power in 1948 on a ticket of Separate Development, also known as Apartheid. The schools were to be taken from Church control and the Nationalist Government believed in home-language education for each group. Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, the National Party leader, regrettably made a statement that he wanted a type of education that would "keep a Black man in his place." So, the proposed move to home-language education was construed as an insidious plan to "keep a Black man in his place". Hence, home-language education assumed the status of being viewed as the veneer for mediocrity and poor standards. Thus, the debate on home-language education has never been based on its merits and demerits, but it is always based on Verwoerdian agenda that wanted to retard the Black advancement through education. As English was forbidden as a medium of instruction in Black schools by the Apartheid regime, it subsequently became a forbidden fruit that all wanted.

While the democratic South Africa embraces additive multilingualism, English has continued to dominate the linguistic arena, notwithstanding the Constitutional imperatives that promote multilingualism.

MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

As the researcher teaches some part-time student-teachers on Saturdays, he has realized in their informal discussions that the majority of them have children in boarding and suburban schools. The researcher became keen to know why they send their children to such schools. Their response has been that their children should acquire good command of English in schools with all essential resources.

The researcher also noted these part-time in-service teachers were Black Africans, living and teaching in deep rural parts within Zululand, Uthungulu and Mkhanyakude District Municipalities. Their schools are indeed not well resourced. Furthermore, running water and electricity are a luxury for a selected few areas. A few do have well resourced libraries, laboratories and sports facilities. Parents with means send their children to suburban or boarding schools. It is hoped that this will help their children escape abject poverty and having got to go through scantily resourced schools.

The researcher as an English teacher was puzzled by responses from these NPDE (National Professional Diploma in Education) part-time student-teachers, and hence the desire to explore the matter further.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

This paper aspires to get into the complex maze of the home-language education debate, but it also seeks to identify attitudes, perceptions and fears that cloud this debate in South Africa. The author avers that there is indisputable evidence that home-language education is the best medium of instruction for every child, but this evidence is obscured by deeply ingrained attitudes, perceptions and fears that prevail amongst the Black community. This paper wants to measure the prevalence of these attitudes and perceptions and their impact on this debate.

Research Questions

The problem which is of major concern in this article:

- What are the fundamental reasons for in-service teachers wanting schools which can expose their children to English?

- What are the in-service teachers' perceptions of wanting schools which can expose their children to good English?
- What are the in-service teachers' analysis of the roles of English and indigenous languages in the democratic South Africa?
- What are the in-service teachers' expectations of what a good school would do for their children?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to collect sufficient data to answer postulated research question, both literature study and empirical investigation based on quantitative and qualitative research design were undertaken.

Literature Review

The researcher consulted literature which is relevant to the topic. The process involves the use of journals, bulletins, periodicals, dissertations, theses, newspaper cuttings and every possible secondary source of information related to the topic. This was done to provide a critical synthesis of what has already been written on the topic.

Quantitative and Qualitative Research Paradigms

According to Cresswell, in Ndou (2008,18), 'research design' refers to the plan according to which relevant data are collected. This study of the challenges compounding the debate concerning English as a LoLT and Teaching and Home-Language Education in South Africa followed the quantitative and qualitative methods. These methods were chosen in the light of the purpose of the study, the kind of information that was required and the available resources.

Population and Sampling

The researcher used the cluster and simple random sampling method to select respondents from a total population of 437 part time in-service student teachers. Two hundred and eighty-seven (287) of these students returned the questionnaire while one hundred and fifty (150) did not respond.

This method was favoured for its simplicity, unbiased nature and its closeness to fulfilling the major assumption of probability, namely that each element in the population stands an equal chance of being selected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, 210 & Kumar, 2005, 112).

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was designed as research instrument for quantitative survey. This questionnaire was designed to give a researcher an accurate profile of the respondents in terms of their home language and the language of instruction at schools attended by their children.

The items in the questionnaires included the following:

- Checking whether they wanted to see their children doing their home language at school.
- Giving the researcher a profile of the school.
- Determining the parental attitudes towards English, mother-tongue education and the role of indigenous language in democratic South Africa.
- Respondents had some expectations when they send children to these schools and these expectations had to be identified.
- Respondents were requested to give reasons for not sending their children to schools where they teach.

The question of reliability and validity underpinned the process of designing the instrument, as it is significant that the instrument yields the same results whenever and wherever it is used. Questions were formulated as stand-alone so that respondents could not readily detect connection among questions. This ensured that respondents did not see a pattern in which they had to answer questions. Each question was well thought out by respondents and this prevented a perfunctory responses. The instrument was valid as certain trends surfaced during its administration from group to group. There was no outrageous difference from one group to the other. This gave the impression that the instrument succeeded doing what it was meant to do.

Data analysis

The data was analysed manually. The questionnaire was sorted according to responses of participants as shown in Table 1 and qualitative data was organized into meaningful themes as shown in Table 2

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 Reasons why respondents send their children to former Model C schools

Table 1 revealed that 66% of the respondents indicated that had children at suburban and boarding schools, whilst 34% indicated that they did not have children at these schools.

Table 1 also revealed that 66% of the respondents indicated that home language is not taught at suburban and boarding schools, whilst 34% indicated that it was taught.

Most of the schools are not offering African languages as a home language, but some offer them as a second additional languages (as a third language). This means that it is taught at a very basic level for minimal communication skills. This is the concern of Vic Webb in his paper where he bemoans “the hegemony of English and concomitant marginalization of other official languages in South African education (Kamwangamalu, 2002; Swales, 1996; Chamaar, 2007). In a study conducted in six primary schools in Cape Town educators reported that the presence of teaching assistants fluent in mother tongue of ESOL learners helps them to cope better (O’Connor, 2003; Phillipson, 2007). This shows the significance of home-language education in ESOL classes. Learners are also referred to speech-language therapists for language disorders (Stoffels, 2004) when their language educators interpret their language differences as deficiencies

Once again, Table I revealed that 66% of the respondents’ children are not taught in their home language, whilst 34% indicated theirs are taught the home language. Learners are not taught in their home language in these schools. But home language is highly significant according to Mills & Mills (1993: 54), as it is crucial for a bilingual child to use home language in class, not only to emphasise the child’s sense of group identity, but also to relieve the pressures of the initial cultural transition from home to school. Learners struggle to grapple with basic concepts in the second language as they may still be learning the second language (Goodwyn & Findlay, 2003: 27)

Table 1 furthermore, indicated that 66% of the respondents were not concerned about their children not being taught in home language, whilst 34% indicated that they were concerned. Respondents are not concerned about this, they claim learners at this age acquire additional languages with ease. Respondents expect their children to acquire the new language of learning and teaching simultaneously with the subject matter. Despite a growing awareness that home-language education is more effective than bilingual or second language medium of instruction (Heugh, 2002: 171), English has become a dominant medium of instruction in South Africa.

The Verwoerdian statement raised its head as parents felt home-language education was promoted by the National Party as a ploy to exclude Blacks from the main stream of the economy

Table 1 in conclusion indicated that 99% of the respondents indicated that English was the medium of instruction at their children's schools.

Table 2 Perceptions of respondents about the quality of education in Model C Schools

Table 2 revealed that the majority of the respondents (66%) agreed that education through the medium of English enhances the child's chances of success at work. To this question the success story of Khanyisile Dhlomo, the first Black news reader in the English Television channel in South Africa, was quoted to confirm benefits of sending a child to English-medium schools. Political leaders seem to rise to high positions in relation to their good command of English. The name of the former President, Thabo Mbeki, was cited by most respondents.

Table 2 revealed that an overwhelming majority of the respondents (94%) agreed that English is an essential tool for one to escape from the vicious cycle of poverty through a good job. The corporate world demands good English for one's upward mobility.

Once again, a high proportion of the respondents (97%) in Table 2 indicated they agreed that schools should have committed teachers, a well-resourced laboratory and a library.

Table 2 revealed that all respondents agreed that they would not send their children to schools with poor facilities and inadequately qualified teachers.

Again all respondents in Table 2 agreed that home language education is the best, but they quickly added that this is only ideal in countries where the home language is also the language of commerce, so they believed that this is not applicable in South Africa where English dominates the corporate world.

Furthermore, Table 2 revealed that all the respondents concurred that a good command of English underpins one's success in the corporate world.

In conclusion, Table 2 revealed that all the respondents are of the same opinion that the role of indigenous languages is to provide cultural identity and to unify the nations as a people with a common destiny and history.

DISCUSSIONS

Responses have been classified into the following five categories:

- Political
- Economical
- Cultural
- International communication tool
- Distortion of a Linguistic notion

Political category

The policies of the Nationalist Party are still shaping the thoughts and perceptions of South Africans at large. The initial mistrust inculcated by the National Party's Bantu Education policy still rears its head up to this day. There are antecedent and intervening variables that are at play

Economic category

The perception of English as a ticket to success in the corporate world predominantly prevails in many homes. This stems from interviews for jobs that are conducted in English where the best candidate is the one who speaks impeccable English.

Cultural category

Respondents seem to associate indigenous languages with cultural identity, national unity and general heritage matters. There was no future dimension accorded to these languages. No one saw a role for these languages in the main stream of the economy in the near future.

English as a tool for International communication

English is perceived as a language that transcends geographical barriers. One needs it to be understood all over the world and for doing business across the globe.

Deliberate Misunderstanding of a Linguistic theory

A number of respondents reiterated the fact that young children acquire additional languages effortlessly before they reach puberty. This is correct, but this theory applies to a scenario where a child is almost immersed in a new language. At school the learner is not only expected to speak the language, but he has to learn through it. Research has proved learning in any language other than your home language is stressful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Black communities have to address the home-language question without the memory of Verwoerd's statement. The belief that the use of home language for learning and teaching will exclude children from meaningful participation in the English language driven corporate world, should be thoroughly analysed by all social strata
- The role of English as a bond in nation-building as well as a tool for international business and communication has to be revisited.
- This debate has to take place at grassroots level in all communities. Enough time has to be set aside for intense deliberations since half-thought solutions' implications will be far-reaching over a long period. A quick-fix approach will not yield lasting solutions. The Government should not impose policies.
- The public broadcaster has to launch massive awareness campaigns to discuss merits and demerits of each argument. This will educate and thus empower the public to make informed decisions. Klaasen (2002) states that first language speakers are often unaware of the complexity of their sentences or their fast rate of delivery. This makes training in the methodological and presentational aspects of the second language as a medium of instruction very essential.

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Table 1 Table 1 Reasons why respondents send their children to former Model C schools

Items		Yes	No	TOTAL
Do you have child at a suburban or boarding school?	N	287	150	437
	%	66	34	100
Is your child's home language	N	150	287	437

taught at suburban and boarding schools	%	34	66	100
Is your child taught in his/her home language	N	150	287	437
	%	34	66	100
Are you concerned about your child not being taught in home language	N	150	287	437
	%	34	66	100
Is English the medium of instruction at your child's school.?	N	433	4	437
	%	99	1	100

Table 2 Perceptions of respondents about the quality of education in Model C Schools

Items		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	TOTAL
English-medium schools enhance the child's chances of success at work	N	220	67	90	60	437
	%	51%	15%	21%	13%	100%
A child needs good English to be successful in life and to escape from the vicious cycle of poverty through a good job.	N	287	125	25	0	437
	%	66%	28%	6%	0%	100%
The most essential resources in a school are committed teachers, a well-resourced laboratory and a library	N	403	21	13	0%	437
	%	92%	5%	3%	0%	100%
Poor facilities and inadequately qualified teachers are reasons for	N	437	0	0	0	437

parents not to send their children to such schools.	%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Home language education is the best for children	N	321	92	17	7	437
	%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
A good command of English underpins one's success in the country.		423	14	0	0	437
	%	97%	3%	0%	0%	100%
The role of Indigenous languages is to provide cultural identity and to unify the nations as a people with a common destiny and history		437	0	0	0	437
	%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%