

Learning in Mother Tongue: Language Preferences in South Africa

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ABSTRACT This study is based on the findings conducted to investigate children and parents' preferences of language of learning and teaching in grades 1 – 3. This study is a survey in which interviews and questionnaires were used to gather data from pupils, parents, school heads, Foundation Phase teachers and teachers in Early Childhood Development Centres (ECDs). The sample consisted of fifty learners, forty parents, thirty school heads, hundred and fifty Foundation Phase teachers and twenty ECDs. Respondents were purposively selected from metropolitan, township and rural schools in Motheo district in Free State province in South Africa. The findings were that learners and parents preferred English as the language of instruction at Foundation Phase. It is recommended that there is a need for attitude change and thus a serious campaign for all stakeholders to appreciate the role played by the mother tongue in the early years of schooling.

INTRODUCTION

The apartheid era in South Africa was characterised by a language policy that did not officially recognised indigenous languages (L1) spoken by the majority of the population. In 1994, the government recognised the significant role played by the mother tongue in learning, thus an educational language policy raised the status of indigenous languages. According to the official language policy of the 1996 Education Act and Department of Education (2002), children in Grade 1 – 3 are to be instructed in their first language, and learn English (L2) as one of the subjects on the curriculum. From Grade 4 onwards, English becomes the language of instruction. According to research and literature (Borich and Tombari, 1997; Ndamba 2008; Mofokeng 2013; Bachore 2014; Ganuza and Hedman 2015) this language policy can be identified as a possible model for bilingual education.

In South Africa, parents are permitted to choose the language in which their children are to be educated (Department of Education 2002); but the majority of parents demand that their children are educated in English (Heugh 2010). This is partly due to global prestige of English as a medium of international communication, language of business, and pre-requisite for employment (Buthelezi 2003).

Bilingual indigenous-English speaking children often have early verbal input in indigenous language; and English is introduced once they

enter school and develops subsequently through English literacy instruction (Ndamba 2008; Khosa 2012). The language situation of these children is termed both emergent bilingual and English second language learners (EL2) as they first encounter a new language when they go to school and have limited oral proficiency in that language (Bialystok et al. 2005; Bachore 2014), as opposed to other bilingual learners who have encountered both languages before scholastic instruction begins. Not much work has been done on parents and pupils' language preferences in a bilingual set up at the elementary level in South Africa. Thus this study sought to investigate unexamined early childhood bilingual education issues in South Africa, where there is concern about poor performance by pupils in both L1 and L2 language arts.

Attitudes toward Mother Tongue Instruction

The positive outcomes of a mother tongue instruction policy depend on people's attitudes towards the first language and English second language. Also to understand how attitudes towards a language develop, it is necessary to consider the social and political history of a nation, since such historical forces play a significant role (Bamgbose 1991; Robinson, 1996; Khosa 2012). Thus, the apartheid and the post-apartheid language and educational policies obviously provide a solid basis of the explana-

tion of attitudes towards African languages, and English second language (Silva 1997; Bamgbose 1991; Roy-Campbell 1996; Barnes 2004; Adegbiya 1994; Desai, 2001; Rahman and Asmari 2014).

The apartheid language policies either adopt the use of Afrikaans/English from the first grade or only used indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in the lower classes of the primary school. In the apartheid era, South Africa was officially considered a bilingual state, with English and Afrikaans as the sole official languages of the state. With the demise of apartheid in 1994, the new government has adopted a multilingual language policy giving official recognition not only to English and Afrikaans but also to nine African languages: Xhosa, Zulu, Ndebele, Swati, Tswana, Sotho, Pedi, Venda, and Tsonga. One of the main objectives of the new language policy has been to promote the status of the nine African languages by, among other things, using them as media of learning. Six years after the policy was enshrined in the country's new constitution, it seems that not much progress has been made yet in attempts to implement the policy, especially with respect to the issue of mother-tongue education. Rather, the status quo prevails: English and Afrikaans remain the media of learning in English-medium and Afrikaans-medium schools, respectively, much as they were in the apartheid era. The African languages are offered as media of learning from first through fourth grades in predominantly black schools, after which English—not Afrikaans because of its association with apartheid—takes over as the instructional medium.

Attitudes can be created through functions that people perceive particular languages as performing. In the African context, Ndamba (2008), is of the opinion that official and local languages are regarded as opposed to each other, rather than as complementary as evidenced by the fact that one of the two languages may be regarded as a more suitable language for certain domains, and the characteristic functions are seen in dichotomous terms. Ndamba (2008) says the local languages are characterized by oral usage, individual/community usage, emotional attachment, village solidarity and personal loyalties. English language is characterized by institutional usage, written usage, functional use, economic advantage and national communication. English as an official language has

therefore been associated with the success, power, prestige, progress and achievement, and such associations have generally resulted in English getting a high positive evaluation (Ndamba 2008).

Learner Attitudes

In South Africa, the situation is not different. South African learners who were interviewed by Setati (2005) and Langa and Setati (2006) preferred the use of English in the learning of mathematics in the secondary school. These researchers attributed learner choice of the language of instruction to the socio political situation. These learners did not see value in their African languages as they do not have any social and economic benefits. In September 2009, the Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande said that those taking up African languages at University level were sometimes perceived by their peers as 'second-grade students' (Sapa 2009). These are few examples of learners' attitudes towards English as a medium of instruction.

Parental and Community attitudes

In South Africa, research carried out by Ngidi (2007) and Ndamba (2008) revealed that parents from schools of Mthunzi circuit (KwaZulu-Natal) had positive attitude towards the use of English as language of learning and teaching and as additional language in schools. Then parents of children from Navilsig Secondary school regarded Sesotho second language as being of no value to their children's lives since it did not render a person employable. The same sentiments were expressed by children of parents concerned. These parents had no objection to their children learning English which they felt was more important for the future of their children.

Part of this study focused on learner's language preferences since these children are the direct beneficiaries of language policy which recognizes the significance of learning in the mother tongue in the lower grades. Parents' views were also sought to establish if there is consistency between language policy and parents' perception of the role of the mother tongue in teaching and learning.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to establish the extent to which learners in grade 1 – 3 and parents with children in Foundation Phase value the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The impetus of the study came from the strong evidence from research findings which indicate that the mother tongue plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning of bilingual children during early years of schooling.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study used a mix method design and both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain data. A mixed method is a procedure used to collect and analyse both quantitative and qualitative research to understand the problem identified in the study (Creswell 2008). The purpose of mixed methods in this study is to explore the problem that relate to both aspects of the approach and do so accurately.

Sampling

It consisted of fifty (50) learners aged between six and eight years in grade 1 -3 (10 in grade 1 and 20 in both grade 2 and 3) and forty (40) parents with children in the Foundation Phase. The study also targeted all schools principals, all Foundation Phase teachers and Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers from thirty (30) schools to elicit their views on parents and learners' language preferences in learning. Twenty (20) ECDs, thirty (30) principals and hundred and fifty (150) Foundation Phase teachers participated in the study. School principals, ECDs and Foundation Phase teachers were included in the study since these interact with learners and parents most of the time. They get salient issues from parents through utterances, comments and suggestions during consultations and parents' days. Respondents were selected from metropolitan, township and rural schools in Motheo district of Education.

Instruments

The face to face interviews were conducted in the mother tongue since most of the respondents were not competent in English. If the interviewer is skilful, Best and Kahn (1993) be-

lieve that the interview can be regarded as a data gathering device which is often superior to others as people are more willing to talk than to write, and confidential information may be obtained from respondents who might be reluctant to put it in writing. The interview was considered suitable in this study in order to determine respondents' opinion, attitudes or trends of beliefs (Sharma 1994).

The interview schedule for parents had closed and open-ended questions to allow the researcher to follow points which needed elaboration and to clarify questions the respondents misunderstood (Creswell 2008). The interview was specifically aimed at answering the research question on whether there was consistency between language policy and parents' perceptions of the role of the mother tongue in learning. The interview guide for parents had questions which solicited information on their children's grade level, whether they preferred their children to learn in the mother tongue preferences.

The interview schedule for learners in grades 1 – 3 was structured and intended to find out children's language preferences in speaking, reading and writing. It was meant to answer the research question on the perceptions and attitudes of learners on the use of first language as a medium of instruction. Best and Kahn (1993) say that interviews are particularly appropriate in getting responses from young children.

The questionnaires in this study served as a complementary data collection instrument. The respondents were primary school principals, ECDs and Foundation Phase teachers. There were two questionnaires, one for grade 1 – 3 teachers and other for both school principals and ECDs. Questionnaires were quite appropriate because they were relatively easy and quick to answer (Best and Kahn 1993). With three types of samples and 181, respondents, the structured questions enabled data to be analysed and compared easily. Reliability was ensured because the questionnaire was structured to allow for greater uniformity in the way questions were asked. Similar questions were asked of Foundation Phase teachers, school principals and ECDs and responses were compared, thereby catering for reliability.

Procedure

Since this study involves participation of minor children, permission to conduct the study was sought from the Free State Provincial Edu-

cation Department in the Motheo District directorate. The interviews were conducted by the researcher. Learners who were interviewed were identified by teachers as weak, average and fast learners in order to ensure that all ability levels were represented. Parents who had come to conduct business at schools and had learners in any of the Foundation Phase grades were interviewed. Questionnaires were administered to school principals, ECDs and Foundation Phase teachers of 30 primary schools.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis, frequencies and percentages were used.

Results

Results show that all the sampled learners speak *Sesotho/Setswana* at home. Concerning language spoken with friends during break time, at home and at play, all learners indicated that *Sesotho/Setswana* was the only language they used for communication. The results show that the majority of children understood when the mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase School. Hence, children's responses to the interview concerning their language preference in reading, speaking and writing showed that:

- ♦ that the majority of pupils interviewed preferred to read and write in English but when it came to speaking, they mainly liked *Sesotho/Setswana*;
- ♦ more respondents indicated that children preferred to learn in English;
- ♦ the greater percentage of those who responded indicated that parents wanted their children to learn in English;
- ♦ various reasons were given by parents for the language preferred as medium of instruction

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The perceptions and attitudes of learners in grade 1 – 3 were examined on the basis of their language preferences in reading, speaking and writing. The general finding was that children preferred to read and write in English, while they mainly liked to speak in *Sesotho/Setswana*. However, it may be necessary to mention here that

when children said they liked to write in English, they could have meant copying English words from the chalkboard since they may not be able to express themselves adequately in English, which is a second language (Ndamba 2008).

A possible explanation for favouring English more than the first language may be that children are told by parents that they go to school to learn English (Ndamba 2008; Mofokeng 2013; Khejeri 2014). Attitudes that English is more important than *Sesotho/Setswana* may be passed on to children by parents who tell children that English provides educational and employment opportunities in the future (Hart 2008), thus children may begin to develop negative attitudes towards the first language which they might then regard as less important (Bamgbose 1991; Adegbija 1994; Robinson 1996; Mchunu 2006; Rahman and Asmari 2014).

Learner attitudes can also be explained in terms of influence from teachers (Setati 2005; Ngidi 2007; Ndamba 2008; Bhoi 2014). When teachers undermine the children's first language and use English as medium of instruction from the first grade, this may result in children having a negative attitude towards their mother tongue (Murray and Smith 1988; Ngara 1982; Tupas 2015). This attitude comes about possibly because when their mother tongue is not used for educational purposes, children may not attach any importance to it (Bamgbose 1991; Roy-Campbell 1996; Silva 1997; Langa and Setati 2006).

Nevertheless, on a more positive note towards first language, the study found that children liked to speak in the mother tongue more than in English during lessons. This may be due to the fact that these children, who all indicated that they speak *Sesotho/Setswana* at home, may find it free and natural to express themselves in their mother tongue during lessons (Fyle 1976; Ngara 1982; Ndamba 2008; Gaunuza and Hedman 2015).

This study found that there was no consistency between language policy and parents' perception of the role of the mother tongue in learning since parents clearly indicated that they preferred English to *Sesotho/Setswana* as the language of instruction for their children in the Foundation Phase. English is positively evaluated possibly due to its functions in the future of children, as expressed by one of the respondents in an interview:

“Ha a ka pasa Sesotho, ha se na ho mo thusa ho fumana mosebetsi. Ngwana e nwa ha a na ho kena Yunivesithing ho ya ka molao a sa pasa English. Ke dumela hore ngwana wa ka a qobellwe ho ithuta English.” (If he/she passes Sesotho, it will not help him/her get a job. The child will not be admitted if he/she does not pass English. I prefer my child to be forced to learn English).

Another respondent put it thus, *“Ngwana o tla tswela pele a sa tsebe letho. Qetellong batla be ba sentse bokamoso ba ngwana ka ho phethahala.”* (The child will proceed without knowing anything. As a result they would have totally destroyed the future of that child).

This indicates that parents of *Sesotho/Setswana* children have become used to English as a language which provides their children with a more profitable future in the world of employment. English is viewed as performing high functions than the mother tongue which does not render a person employable; hence parents tend to negatively evaluate indigenous languages because they do not perform such high functions (Adegbija 1994; Robinson 1996; Hart 2008; Bachore 2014).

The other explanation for the positive evaluation of English by parents is that because of the apartheid policy, parents got used to undermining the first language since it was not an official language. Ndamba (2008) and Khosa (2012) attribute the negative attitudes towards the first language to the fact that the current language policy requires children to learn in their mother tongue only in the lower grades. Children will eventually have to learn English and will be required to pass English as a subject in order to obtain a Matric Senior Certificate. This was demonstrated by one parent in this study, who, with reference to the use of *Sesotho/Setswana* as a language of instruction in the Foundation Phase, says,

“Ke tjho jwalo hobane ke qaleho e mpe. Ha bana ba fihla ditlhahlobong tsa metriki ho tla be ho le thata ho bona, ho tla etsa hore ba pase dithuto tse ding empa e seng puo ya English.” (I say so because that is a bad beginning. When children get to Matric examinations it will be difficult for them, resulting in them passing other subjects but not English language).

The negative attitudes towards first language are further enhanced by the fact that parents are ignorant of the role the mother tongue in teach-

ing and learning, particularly for bilingual children during early years of schooling (Mwamwenda 1996; Sprosty 1995; Clegg 2005; Ndamba 2008; Mofokeng 2013). In this study, only 17 percent of the parents showed an appreciation of the role of the mother tongue in the teaching and learning of children. The community appears to be ignorant of the linguistic richness brought to school by children from non-English speaking children (Murray and Smith 1988; Ntshingila 2006; Khejeri 2014).

CONCLUSION

Bilingual education will continue to raise the most controversial and intriguing questions, therefore continuing to be a debatable topic among people involved with education. The suggestion we get from the findings is that parents and children had a more positive attitude towards English than the mother tongue as language of instruction at the Foundation Phase.

Briefly, majority of the respondents in this study indicated that they favoured English as the language of instruction in the Foundation Phase because English is a gate way to success in school and subsequent employment opportunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This shows that people have been so linguistically colonized that they have more trust in the second language than they do in the first language process of children's learning. Parents and teachers need to be exposed to information concerning the value of using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction as these participants were unaware of the educational benefits of using the first language during the initial years of a child's schooling.

We need to change parents and learners attitudes for favouring English more than the first language. This should be done through campaigns to educate people on the rationale use for using the first language at Foundation Phase. Currently PANSALB is making great strides to promote indigenous languages standards through sub-projects which involve making monolingual mother tongue dictionaries. Unless there is attitude change at all levels of society, and strong government intervention, the work done by PANSALB might appear a futile exercise.

There is a need for further research on how to strengthen current policy implementation measures governing mother tongue in the Foundation Phase education in South Africa. There is a solution, even though 19 years after freedom, parents, teachers and learners still have negative attitudes towards learning in first language, despite benefits offered by mother tongue instruction

Finally, research is necessary concerning on how South Africa as a nation can take advantage of additive bilingualism rather than viewing a subtractive bilingualism which undermines learning at the first language level. Hence, the scope of this study should also extended to how skills can be enhanced between the first language and the second language level, considering that some studies show how that the transfer is not automatic

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