LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICY: A BARRIER TO ACADEMIC AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNERS ACROSS GRADES: A CASE OF SOUTH AFRICAN TEACHERS’ NARRATIVES.

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ABSTRACT

Decolonising education has and is still an uphill task for many African countries especially those that have scars of a gruesome colonial past such as South Africa, among others. It is against this background that I argue in this paper that the language of instruction imposed through Language in Education policy has and is perpetuating the colonial legacy and bottle necking impacting negatively on cognitive and academic development of learners. Consequently, there are loud calls from various stakeholders and student bodies to decolonise education in South Africa to change the status quo. Since 1976 and later on 2015, South African youth in higher education institutions have intensified the call to decolonise education. One of the major areas of concern towards decolonisation is language of learning and teaching (LoLT) and the language of learning materials. This call comes because even though South Africa is now a democracy that gives official status to its indigenous languages, English still enjoys hegemony in all areas including and especially in education as the LoLT from grade 4 up to tertiary education. This translates to a betrayal of the constitutional prerogative of inclusive education for all. Teacher narratives and questionnaire were data generation tools from teachers in South Africa. They articulated their experiences and their recommendations to improve the system. The data generated was processed and presented into themes.

Keyword: language in education policy, language of learning, decolonisation, indigenous language, hegemony

1. INTRODUCTION

Language of learning and teaching deserve diligent attention if academic and cognitive development is to be achieved. Students and concerned stakeholders have to be upfront in calling for decolonisation of the curriculum. These struggles have been raging since 1976 till this day and the most recent one is the student protest of 2015. There has been an outcry of poor results across all subjects because of the language of learning and teaching. This paper explores how the language of learning and teaching contribute to weaker cognitive and academic development. In the same vein, recommendations are presented. The focus was on what teachers’ experiences are with regard to the language of learning and teaching in their classes. Further is an analysis of how teachers applied other practices to mitigate the challenge of comprehension of concepts.

Questionnaires were emailed to teachers and some through whatsapp. Importantly, teachers wrote their narratives regarding their experiences as educators in the classroom. This study is qualitative because its intention was to find out the underlying reasons behind poor cognitive and academic advancement because of the language in education policy. Data was processed and presented according to themes.

2. BACKGROUND TO STUDY

Language during the apartheid period was used as a tool that either allowed or hindered access to education, with children who spoke English and Afrikaans gaining access to quality education as compared to children who spoke indigenous languages, as these had a low status in society. Legislation such as the Bantu Education Act of 1953 were implemented to provide watered down
education to African children so they could later serve children of the white race (Mgwashu, 2006). English enjoyed hegemonic status, as it was through it that social mobility could be ensured. As a result, even though it was also a colonial language; when the National Party enforced Afrikaans as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) during the 1970s, students protested this during the 1976 student uprising in favour of English as a LoLT. Ironic as this may be, Frydman (2011) notes that many African countries post-independence continued using colonial language policies in attempts to promote national unity and social cohesion. This continuation has dire consequences for indigenous languages. Wa Thiong'o (1988) suggests that this led to a loss of identity in Africans. In addition, access to quality education is compromised (Mgwashu, 2011). Therefore, the country finds itself in an education crisis.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The major goal of all classroom practitioners is to promote success among their learners and students despite circumstances. Language in Education policy needs further refinement so that it does not become a conduit of failure and socioeconomic relegation. It must not be just on paper that indigenous languages ought to form part of the teaching and learning package along English which is the language of choice. It defeats the purpose of the fight initiated in 1976 by the brave youths of South Africa to fight for the decolonisation of the curriculum. This process must not only be a preserve for the selected few schools that are privately funded to promote the agenda of decolonising of the Language in Education Policy (LiEP), the government must come on board.

4. STUDY AIM

The study focuses on highlighting the major challenges that are a result of Language in Education Policy to the general students and learners in South Africa and how teachers are navigating their way around the problem.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by the classical theory of language based on the “premise that language planning takes place at the level of the state and the plans come into existence in the interest of the development of the entire society” (p.876). The theory becomes the ‘police’ to monitor the effectiveness of the stated agenda of language policy and practiced by different sectors of the society. From the definition, a language policy is implemented to ascertain that there is neither discrimination nor any form of prejudice because of language. The government through its surrogates make it a point that, what is written receives a buy in from the public. This is done through outlining the main goals to be attained such as equal access to education, participation in nation building, participation in socioeconomic activities and fostering unity. In the same vein, Jernudd, (1997) argues that “we recognised and accepted the realities of political process and central state power; and we believed in the good of state action that governments could act efficiently and satisfactorily” (p.132). In line with Jernudd (1997)’s argument, it is the responsibility of the state to make sure that language policies are fair and the general populace has confidence in their respective governments. For this study, the focus is on access to equal opportunities in education towards the attainment of functional literacy. Besides functional literacy, access to education fosters unity because of the ability to connect with individuals from various communities and backgrounds. According to the South African language in education, multilingualism is central because of its ability to “counter any particularistic ethnic chauvinism or separatism through mutual understanding”. (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1993, Clause 1[6]). It is against this background that this theory provides the right lenses to inform my research and analyse and process the data generated. The sad part of all education systems is deviation from the policy of equal access because of the lack of sincerity from the government and school authorities. Basing on the stated assertions, the dismal pass rates and drop out in institutions of higher learning seem to be a total deviation from the policy objectives. This framework can assist the powers in the education system to revisit what the language in education policy recommends and implement what was approved to minimise cases of academic and cognitive prejudices.

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

6.1. Educational challenges

South Africa has an enduring literacy crisis. Although several factors contribute to this crisis,
Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir (2004) suggest that the passing of the Education and Training Act in 1979 by the apartheid government was the beginning of the education crisis we have today. This act reduced mother tongue instruction from 8 years to 4 years, decreasing matriculation pass rates to as low as 44% in 1992, as compared to an 83.7% pass rate (among black learners) in 1976 (ibid.). Although achievement results are no longer divided by race, Buhlunag (2015) and Mgqwashu (2011) provide evidence that in the present day, matriculation results still differ according to race, with patterns similar to the ones mentioned by Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, (2004) where African learners perform worse on average in comparison to white learners.

In analysing the second Annual National Assessments (ANA) results of literacy and mathematics skills, Badat and Sayed (2014) reveal that learners’ mathematics abilities decline steadily as they progress through school. In addition, there were significant gaps in performance between schools based on which quintile they were. Quintile 5 schools-with learners from affluent backgrounds, scored on average 10-15% higher than learners from quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools-who come from poor backgrounds (Badat & Sayed, 2014). These results show that, not only are results divided by race but by class differences as well. Noteworthy is that in most quintile 5 schools, LoLT is usually English from grade 1, as compared to quintile 1 schools that transition to English only in the fourth grade while learners are still learning the language.

These statistics are in agreement with research on mother tongue instruction, that suggests that learners fare better academically if they receive a firm foundation in mother tongue instruction, as “the formative skills and habits of reading and writing are best tackled without the additional cognitive burden of having to do so in a ‘foreign’ language” (Wright, 2012, p. 6). Furthermore, second language (SL) acquisition is also believed to happen successfully when a child has been using the SL for at least 7 years, gaining familiarity and internalising it during that period (Cummins, 2000). Only then will children learn well in it.

In South Africa, that is not the case. With approximately 65% of all South African learners not learning in their home languages post grade 3 (Department of Basic Education, 2010), these learners are expected to transition and learn in a SL in grade 4 after only gaining familiarity with the SL for 3 years-as a subject. Even in those three years, some learners only encounter the SL in the classroom. Consequently, the little time made available by the curriculum to acquire the home language, affects the acquisition of the second language. In addition, early transition to using the SL as a LoLT perpetuates the literacy challenges we have as a country, and keeping the achievement gap divided by race, as was during apartheid. The result is that most learners have access to the doors of learning but do not have meaningful, epistemological access to education, Pendlebury (2008).

6.2. Educational reform efforts

A number of efforts have been made by the current government to try and dissipate the literacy crisis we have in the country. These efforts include curricula changes, the introduction of the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) and giving free access to primary and high school education in most public schools. Below, I briefly zoom into each of these efforts and what changes have resulted from them.

6.3. Curricula changes

An understanding of what the curriculum is needed to fully grasp what the curricula changes we have undergone as a country have done in lessening or keeping intact our literacy challenges. The curriculum, according to Mgqwashu (2017), is bigger than merely choosing what content topics are taught in the classroom. It involves the “values, attitudes, dispositions, worldviews; that get learned, un-learned, re-learned, re-formed, de-constructed, and re-constructed, as a result of...” what learners are exposed to through the schooling experience (Mgqwashu, 2017, p. 1). Language is thus a key part of the curriculum, as it is through it that these values and worldviews are transferred to learners.

Since 1994, there have been four curricula changes in the country; Curriculum 2005 (1997), Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS-2002), National Curriculum Statement (NCS-2007) and the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) (2012) (Adu & Ngibe, 2014). All these were aimed at transforming learning, so that learners engage meaningfully with learning content. Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir (2004) note how in all these curricula changes, there has been a tendency to
alienate them (the curriculum) with language policy planning. Most concerning is the apparent unilingual focus of the curriculum, as opposed to the multilingual focus of the LiEP. Referring to Curriculum 2005 as an example, the aforementioned researchers quote Heugh in her criticism, writing that “Curriculum 2005 included language as a separate learning area... It is as if, despite the constitutional provisions giving official status to 11 languages, there were underlying assumptions that only one language has value (English)” (ibid., p. 8). Consequently, through their learning experiences, learners and parents re-learn that English has value as a LoLT and language of access, as compared to their home languages. A grade R teacher who was a research participant had this to say regarding how the language in education policy is soiled in the classroom and in schools; As a grade R teacher, I experience this de-valuing of indigenous languages and hegemony of English when my learners always want to sing English rhymes and ask me why they do not learn in English just like the learners who school in town. Innocently, some learners relate to me how their parents will move them to public schools in town, so they could have a better command of the English language. This way the hegemony of English is kept in place and multilingualism is only alive in policy documents.

6.4. The Language in Education Policy

According to (Shohamy, 2006)

Language education policy (LEP) refers to such decisions in the specific contexts of schools and universities in relation to home languages, foreign, and second languages. These may include decisions about which language(s) should be taught, when (at what age), for how long (number of years and hours of study), by whom (who is qualified to teach), for whom (who is entitled and/or obligated to learn), and how (which teaching methods, curriculum, materials, tests to be used) (p.119)

The constitution of the Republic of South Africa is widely appraised to be among the best in the world. As a body of law, it regulates the language rights to be enjoyed by all citizens, including the right to learn in one’s own mother tongue. Under section 29 (2) the constitution (South Africa, 1996, p. 12) states that the right to mother tongue education should take the following into account:

- Equity
- Practicability, and
- The need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practises.

Furthermore, under section 30, the constitution (ibid, p. 13) states that “everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights”. The LiEP was formulated to respond to these constitutional imperatives, seemingly “reacting to the oppressive past” (Mgwashu, 2006, p. 14).

Schooling is one of the primary sites of socialization where the challenges of multilingualism and multiculturalism are visible. Through the LoLT, differences in cultural and language backgrounds aid or hinder a successful schooling experience for learners of different languages. Those learners whose language and consequently culture enjoy privilege through the LoLT have been shown to do considerably well compared to those who learn in an additional/second language (Badat & Sayed, 2014). As a response to these research findings and the educational challenges we have, posed by the unequal access to education entrenched during apartheid, the ministry of education produced the LiEP in 1997, in an aim to decolonise education and bring about transformation.

The LiEP promotes multilingualism in the classroom and promotes the status of African languages. As witnessed by the 2015/16/17 student protests in higher education institutions demanding a decolonised curriculum, there seems to be a dissonance between policy and its implementation on the ground, what Beukes (2009) refers to as an inadequate congruence between policy and language attitudes and practice; a trap between intention and performance. Unsurprisingly, this discord results in the continuously declining literacy levels of our learners (Beukes, 2009). Beukes (2009) argues that this may be due to the failure of investigating cultural notions of the role of African languages in education, as language and culture both inform each other. In concurring with Beukes, I notice how a grade R teacher notices the excitement when speaking English and associate a simple greeting in English with driving a fancy car or
living in a suburb. This excitement, which is hardly there or never there when they are learning in isiXhosa, solidifies Beuke’s assertion. In addition, this example shows how having access to a language opens access to other social privileges, hence the preference of English as LoLT over other African languages when parents choose schools for their children. The continued hegemony of English as a language of choice, even though the LiEP promotes multilingualism, clearly stunts the development of African languages as LoLT. Arguments advocating for English as LoLT often cite its abilities to offer epistemological access into universal epistemologies, abilities that indigenous languages do not have. I argue, however, that indigenous languages could offer access to universal epistemologies if developed and given the chance to do so. Mgqwashu (2011)’s research in using isiZulu as a LoLT in a tertiary institution shows that with the necessary commitment, indigenous languages can be developed into academic languages that offer access to universal epistemologies.

7. METHODOLOGY

The paper intends to illuminate how the LiEP in South Africa is a weak vehicle of academic and cognitive processes among learners and students. Teachers through their narratives highlight their experiences in their respective classes. In addition, they discussed ways they bridge the gap created by policy to enable epistemological access. Besides stating the causes and the impromptu strategies they implement to enable access, they came up with a list of recommendations to mitigate the scourge. The qualitative approach was employed to generate data through teacher narratives and questionnaires that were sent through emails and whatsapp. Again the processing of data was qualitatively done. This research was within the qualitative paradigm because the situation under study was real, authentic and it involved human interaction (Cresswell, 2014). Further, convenience sampling was employed to select the participants. This was because the research participants fulfilled all the basic requirements because they were teachers who were directly connected to the learners and were working with LiEP everyday in their respective classes (Dornyei, 2007). The participants in the sample were 22 teachers from all provinces of South Africa. The reason for this sample was for the researcher to get a balanced view of the dynamics of classroom life as experienced by teachers across South Africa as a result of LiEP.

8. FINDINGS

The twenty-two teachers concurred that there are serious issues with the Language in Education policy and there is a need for it to be further refined. Among a host of findings the five teachers who are going to be referenced below represent the out comes from the rest of the participants.

Teacher 1: In my rural class, because of English, my learners are frustrated, appear resigned, they fail and I have witnessed a number of drop outs because of fear of failure. Again, my learners are frustrated with English oral presentations and even responding to questions in class. They respond when in some cases I translate the question to their mother tongue (isiXhosa). It is only after this that I began to experience some dialogue. This is proof that physical access is different from epistemic access. Upon observing these events, I realise that mother tongue can achieve better results if used in the teaching and learning process.

Teacher 2: As a teacher who teaches both English and isiZulu, what I observe when I am teaching is that many times in the class during English lessons, there seems to be no space for actual interaction between teacher and learner or peer to peer, where we could play a bigger role and construct knowledge as is the aim of learner centredness. This is in contrast with how learners interact during isiZulu lessons. isiZulu lessons are always dynamic and learners are always involved in what takes place in the classroom, comparing to the lessons of English. And with this I conclude it is due to insufficient proficiency in English. It maintains a culture of silence (Senkoro, 2004). As a teacher teaching in rural places of KwaZulu Natal, the use of English as the medium of instruction is favouring learners who are from the dominant group, the first language speakers of English which is only a small percentage in South Africa.

Teacher 3: I have experienced that learners who speak good English to be learners who are ready for schooling even in English speaking lessons, these learners score high marks. That is precisely so because they have a high English vocabulary while a smaller vocabulary is common among my learners whose mother tongue is not English. I spent a lot of time translating and defining English words for second language speakers so that the content is grasped.
Teacher 4: When I was a learner in grade 12 I observed that many teachers, teaching not only content subjects but also English in the mother tongue apparently to make learners understand the content better, despite them being required to teach in English by the ministry. The teachers were not to be blamed because they were taught in Afrikaans and it was evident they were not familiar with English and to date graduates are still suffering the consequences of their action as they have also emerged to not have acquired the necessary vocabulary in English for more than 16 years in the schooling system.

Teacher 5:

It is hard to explain new concepts in English to a learner whose mother tongue is not English. This takes me to an incident I had in class about creative writing with a grade 3 group of learners. All these are isiXhosa speaking but I was teaching them English. The creative writing was about a journey I will never forget, I gave them an imaginary story from my journey to give them an idea how they can unlock their imagination but this I did in English because it was an English lesson. It was homework for the day and each had come ready the next day. Almost 80% could not write me an imaginary piece so as disappointed I was I changed to oral and I once again gave them an example in isiXhosa which is understood by 99%. The moment I asked who is next almost everyone wanted to talk because it was in mother language and the imagination was beyond amazing. This showed me the confidence and enjoyment they had being taught in mother tongue. Again teachers themselves are not confident in speaking English hence learners have this fear of expression and limited vocabulary. In the Junior Primary classrooms memorising words/text, drilling words as well as reciting is the nature of teaching English and it does wonders to learners’ comprehension in the junior phase. We require teachers to translate every essential teaching aid to the widely spoken indigenous languages to aid understanding. Research has shown that using mother tongue as a medium of instruction in which learners have knowledge of linguistic structure enhances cognitive learning process.

Analysis

It is glaring from the findings that the LiEP seem to favour learners who are privileged with the correct cultural capital which in this case is the language of learning and teaching. The LiEP was formulated to respond to these constitutional imperatives, seemingly “reacting to the oppressive past” (Mgqwashu, 2006, p. 14) and ironically it is perpetuating the objectives of the colonial past. It is a well-known fact that schooling is one of the primary sites of socialization where the challenges of multilingualism and multiculturalism are visible. Through the LoLT, differences in cultural and language backgrounds aid or hinder a successful schooling experience for learners of different languages. Those learners whose language and consequently culture enjoy privilege through the LoLT have been shown to do considerably well in comparison to those who learn in an additional/second language (Badat & Sayed, 2014). In addition one of the most dominant findings is that learners learn better in their home language. Teacher 5 highlighted how alive the learners were when she decided to switch to mother tongue. Aligning with what has been acknowledged is (Heugh et al, 2007) who acknowledges that learners whose home language is their LoLT for the first 8 years of schooling become stronger academically and do better than those who are taught in a second language from six years. In the same vein the use of indigenous languages will eliminate the issue of translation of texts to indigenous languages because learners will comprehend what is being taught. Teachers will be able to diligently perform their teaching duties because they will be able to engage with their learners. Importantly, “the culture of silence” (Senkoro, 2004) will be eliminated. Basing on the above arguments’, it is important to revive the language policy to further assess for its practicality and effectiveness because it appears to be the reason why there is slowed cognitive and academic development. Furthermore, in light of the above, it seems logical that multilingualism in the classroom is developed through the use of additive bilingualism as a method to develop cognitive and academic growth, and to ensure access to not only the doors of school but to epistemological access as well. Technically, through the constitution and the LiEP, “space has been created to challenge and penalise any act of discrimination…” in education by promoting the use of indigenous languages as LoLT (Alexander, 2005, p. 1) translates to this space being superficial, as the implementation of multilingualism in the classroom has had limited success if any.
Some may argue that it is a costly venture to use indigenous languages in education but I seem to see this as a lazy argument to say indigenous languages are not academically developed as Mgqwashu (2011) has shown that indigenous languages could be developed for use academically. In addition, the use of English as LoLT has been shown to prevent the production of indigenous knowledge (Frydman, 2011); therefore it seems likely that production will intensify once these languages are in use, as the demand for them will push for their production.

9. CONCLUSION

Undisputed from this study is the fact that the LiEP of South Africa needs some introspection to realign it with the needs of the learners so as to eliminate the inequalities ravaging the educational arena across the spectrum. Indigenous languages must be taken seriously to enable progressive learning that is democratic despite race or socioeconomic status. However, this can only suffice if the LiEP is aligned with the research findings highlighted.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS.

- There is a need to revise the current LiEP in education policy so that learning across the curriculum can be in both English and indigenous languages in all subjects.

- It seems logical that multilingualism in the classroom is developed through the use of additive bilingualism as a method to develop cognitive and academic growth, and to ensure access to not only the doors of school but to epistemological access as well.

- Teaching materials must be printed in indigenous languages to enable epistemological access.

- The government need to distribute resources equitably to sustain all learners in schools to erase inequalities in the system.

- Lastly the government must partner with the private sector to fund initiatives to develop materials for schools in indigenous languages.

REFERENCES


