

SADTU'S DISCUSSION DOCUMENT**THE MARGINALISATION OF INDIGENOUS AFRICAN LANGUAGES ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON HOW AFRICAN LEARNERS ARE DENIED OPPORTUNITIES TO SUCCEED IN LIFE****Introduction**

At the beginning of each year, the South African public is confronted with the disappointing Grade 12 results of pupils who use African languages at home. This also result in many learners who use indigenous African languages and have passed Grade 12 being denied access to pursue their studies in higher education institutions as a result of the use of language criteria for admission to higher education in South Africa. The purpose of this discussion document is to provide a critical reflection on how African learners are denied opportunities to succeed in life in their mother country through the unbiased use of English as a language of exclusion for further development and therefore render many Africans unproductive in the national development of their own country.

This critical reflection will focus on the difficulty experienced at school by learners who use indigenous African languages at home, an ontology (nature) and acquisition of learning, negative impact of colonialism on the use of indigenous African languages, language use for cultural inclusivity, how English language is used as an admission criteria to the exclusion of African learners at higher education institutions, the notion of languages as “access for success”, the principle of fairness in assessment for employment equity, and the challenge for intellectualisation of African languages to contribute to poverty reduction. The aim of this discussion is to reflect on how the inequalities of South African society are being perpetuated through the use of language in education. At the heart of the matter lies the notion that the choice of English as the language of learning and teaching is unjustified and oppressive in nature, thereby destroying potential for many African people to be productive in their country by denying them decent job opportunities to the detriment of national skills development of the country as a whole.

The difficulty experienced at school by learners who use indigenous African languages

As a consequence of political history of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, English and Afrikaans have been well established as languages of learning to the exclusion of indigenous African languages. Most African pupils write the exam in a language which they are not familiar with as in most cases English is not the pupils' second language but often their third or fourth language. The effect has been that, for all pupils who use African languages at home, their home language remains a language for everyday communication, but not further education. Alexander (2005) writes about what he calls a ‘social pathology’,

the ‘Static Maintenance Syndrome’, and points out that while African-language speakers are proud of their mother tongues, they use them only in primary language domains, i.e. home, within the community and elementary school. They do not believe that these languages could become a powerful means of communication or part of their ‘formal’ lives. The difficulty most pupils who use African languages at home experience with English has been the focus of the research (Alidou et al., 2006; UNESCO, 2010), ranging from views that emphasise the ‘deprivation’ of pupils who lack cultural capital to the ‘symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) of educational institutions which exclude certain groups from education, in this case the African language speakers.

An ontology (nature) and acquisition of learning

Conceptions of learning have progressed from a narrow cognitivist models to the acknowledgement by Vygotsky (1986) of the importance of socio-cultural processes and the role of education in social transformation (Stetsenko, 2008). The acquisition of language and knowledge is therefore accompanied by the acquisition of ontology, in the process of becoming both the individual and of reality. Education should then be seen as the process through which pupils are enabled to fully participate in the ongoing transformation of reality. Pupils who use African languages at home, and who do not perform well at schools because of the inadequate competence in English as the language of learning and teaching are therefore excluded from full participation in the world of work (Chisholm, 2004; Reddy, 2004; Alexander, 2005). English as a colonial language carries a dominant ontology which threatens the ontologies of the colonised, leaving them in a position of marginalisation and alienation. To address this problem, the ontics of pupils have to be recognised. For pupils to participate fully in social transformation, or in the continuation of transformation of reality, a process of decolonisation is needed. A postcolonial approach needs to be developed that would avoid both neo-colonial imposition and attempts to revert to a ‘pure’ traditional culture. The hope is that such a dynamic concept of culture and ontology, which avoids traces of neo-colonialism, would enhance the ability of pupils to participate actively in shaping an increasingly globalised and complex world.

Postman & Postman (2011) is of the view that reality is not a static entity to be represented in language, but is performed through linguistic and other cultural practices. The mathematical practices of Yoruban pupils enact a reality that is different to that of the official (Western) curriculum. Verran (1999) investigated how different ontic enactments of mathematical concepts of measurement and quantification take place in the official school curriculum and in traditional Yoruban culture. Verran therefore argues that the different enactments of reality in Western and Yoruban ontics are embedded in the different concepts and categories of the languages.

Negative impact of colonialism on the use of indigenous African languages

Bamgbose (2005) discusses the neglect of African languages, pointing out that the role and vitality of African languages have been eroded due to the impact of colonialism. He argued that not many Africans believe their children could receive meaningful education today in

African languages beyond the early years of initial education. This cannot be further from the truth in South Africa today as a result of the liberal tendencies that English is the language of business; therefore for one to stand a chance at the employment queue, he or she should be well-endowed in the language of the colonial master. The implication is that those who are literate only in an African language are viewed as inferior to those who are proficient in an imported or partner language (such as English, French, German and Portuguese). Pupils who use African languages at home are treated differently from the rest of the world since they are not educated in their first languages (Bamgbose, 2005). The reasons why African languages are not used in postcolonial Africa is that English was often the colonially imposed medium of instruction in schools, and the belief that African languages do not have academic terms for scientific concepts to be used for academic purposes. However, if truth be told, African languages can cope with the demands required by technology and science since traditional African concepts about the universe, measurement, medicine and the environment exist and can be used in education. Based on the imposition of colonialism, it is not surprising that **wrong judgements are made on the child's intelligence and ability when the fault lies squarely on a premature use as medium of what is best accepted and treated as a second language. Those who drop out and those who fail at the end of primary school now constitute another squad of the excluded.**

Language exclusion occurs as a result of language politics, especially in South Africa. One way in which language exclusion occurs is caused by the notion of 'official languages', where those who are fluent in the official languages become participators and those who are not, are excluded. In the unique case of South Africa where two of the eleven official languages (English and Afrikaans) are imported languages which have dominant in education, it is clear that children who speak African languages are at a disadvantage in that they have to cope with mastery of English before they can receive any meaningful education, while children who speak English or Afrikaans can go straight to learning new content without having first to learn another language.

Language use for cultural inclusivity

Barasa (2004) writes that language is a component of culture. Acquiring a language therefore also implies acquiring the culture of that language, when pupils acquire many languages they learn aspects of many cultures, opening up cognition of sections of those cultures (Barasa, 2004). Barasa (2004) also refers to the sadness Ngugi wa Thiong'o expresses when pointing out that the language used in the education of African children is foreign to them, and their school books are also written in a foreign language. This includes exercises, tests, and exams, all of which contribute to linguistic bewilderment and subsequent underachievement. While early multilingual experience enables children to appreciate and integrate different cultures and to adapt easily to new situations and environments, pupils in Africa as well as South Africa, are offered insufficient exposure to different African languages with the result that cognitive development is inadequate. Enhanced cognitive functioning that follows upon early multilingual experience promotes cognitive and metalinguistic abilities, such as originality, creativity, divergent thinking, sensitivity to linguistic cues and verbal flexibility. This also assists in the process of cultural inclusivity.

The use of English language as admission criteria to the exclusion of African learners at higher education institutions in South Africa

Many higher education institutions in South Africa have chosen to set additional admission criteria regarding language. Many have opted for only one or two languages of instruction, (English and/or Afrikaans), not only for selection in certain programmes, but also for admission to the institution, despite the fact that many of these institutions have adopted multilingual language policies that include one or more African languages as additional languages of instruction and learning. One example is the University of the Witwatersrand, which requires a level 4 score for English as a home or additional language, in addition to the requirement that a candidate should meet a certain standard in terms of the total National Senior Certificate score and the minimum entry criteria entry into higher education. On the other hand, the University of Pretoria seems to have adopted an approach where the language criteria decision is left to individual faculties. The result is that most of the faculties have set criteria with regard to two languages to the exclusion of African languages. The use of language criteria for admission, as set by many of the institutions, is biased and unfair to the detriment of African language students and these results in their exclusion from these higher education institutions. The language criteria at higher education institutions do not take cognisance of trends in international literature on bilingualism and bilingual education, and they are in contradiction to the *Language in Education Policy of South Africa*, as well as the *Language Policy for Higher Education*.

The notion of languages as “access for success”

In South Africa, the language problem in higher education is perceived to impact greatly on the academic performance of students (Weidmann, 2006; Yeld, 2001). Accordingly, the assessment of competence in terms of language, or the use of language criteria for admission, is considered to be important for the purposes of determining access to higher education, in order to ensure that students cope with the use of the language of teaching and learning of the institutions. This has also been referred to as the ‘access for success’ argument. In South Africa, the languages of instruction for higher education are, currently, mainly English and, sometimes, Afrikaans. The ‘access for success’ argument is often formulated in terms of ‘academic literacy in the language of teaching and learning’. Many students appear to lack the ability to deal with language at an academic level, even when they appear to be quite proficient in communicating socially in a particular language (Yeld, 2006). As a result, measures of language ability, such as language subjects in matric and language tests, are often used to set criteria in terms of language, in addition to criteria regarding school-leaving results.

The literature on bilingualism, bilingual education and foreign-language reading, however, indicates that the competence to infer, deduct, to apply, and to engage in problem-solving, using de-contextualised language clues, also called ‘academic literacy’, is a skill that can be acquired in any language. This ability to transfer to a second language once a threshold level of proficiency in an additional language, and in academic discourse in the first language (African languages in case of South Africa), exists. This can be attributed to a common

underlying proficiency (Cummins, 1980, 1984, 2000; Enright et al, 2000; Hauptman, 2000). In other words, performance in assessments (which are often used for selection) should deliver the same information across groups; and the same constructs should ultimately be measured across groups.

The principle of fairness in assessment for employment equity

In South Africa, issues of fairness are crucial. The problem of large differences of diverse groups is linked to the history of the country. Arguments about testing for the purposes of selection should focus very strongly on redressing past injustices after the dismantling of apartheid (Huysamen, 2002). For example, in the Employment Equity Act it is stated that psychological testing and other similar assessments are prohibited, unless the test or assessment or criteria being used has been scientifically shown to be valid and reliable; can be applied fairly to all employees; and is not biased against any employee or group. This Act also requires the application of affirmative action measures and the assessment of the potential of prospective employees, as well as their subsequent development, so as to ensure equitable representation of suitably qualified people from the designated groups (Huysamen, 2002). While the Employment Equity Act deals explicitly with employment selection, the requirements in terms of bias are also applicable to selection for the purpose of admission into higher education.

In the context of higher education, issues of fairness are couched in the language of access and redress. These aspects are spelled out in specific terms in acts and plans dealing with the transformation of higher education after 1994. In the Higher Education Act, for example, it is clearly stated that while higher education institutions are allowed to set their own admission requirements in addition to the statutory minimum requirements, these requirements *must be sensitive to the educational background of learners*; while the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001) includes equity of access, and outcomes, among the issues to be addressed. The notion of bias has received very little attention in these documents.

The challenge for intellectualisation of African languages to contribute to poverty reduction

Bamgbose (2005) points out that postcolonial authors display awareness that African languages need to be developed and intellectualised. Postcolonial linguists (Alexander, 2005; Bamgbose, 2005; Samassekou, 2005; Szanton, 2005) believe that these languages have to be intellectualised in order to compete on a more equal ground with the colonial languages. This should be done by proponents of the intellectualisation of African languages. Finlayson and Madiba (2002) voice the wish of language planners and linguists when they write that the intellectualisation of our indigenous languages can contribute to reduction of poverty and development remains the challenge for all Africans, particularly those in South Africa. This view is prompted by the fact that African languages are largely neglected and excluded from higher education, public education and public broadcasting sector in our transforming country. This calls for us to wage a struggle for the recognition of indigenous African languages in the mainstream sectors of the society so that they can occupy meaningful role in

public discourse and result in skills development and decent job creations as one of the priority areas of our democratic government.

Conclusion

The purpose of this discussion document is to reflect on how African learners are denied opportunities to succeed in life as a result of marginalisation of the home languages in the public discourse in our country, especially in the education system. It concludes that pupils are ontically confused and that they therefore do not dispose of a strong present framework that could act as a reference point in their future learning. It emphasises that what pupils and African society in general would acquire with the home languages is not only the ability to express themselves in a language with which they are more familiar with, but the ability to see the world in a way that reflects an appropriate level of linguistic, cognitive and ontic development and maturity in their human development and therefore meet the skills development challenges that renders them unproductive in the land of their forefathers. It also cautions higher education institutions in South Africa to be truly committed to redressing past inequalities and to provide equal access to all those who are capable of higher learning. It therefore, remains imperative to continually question the issues relating to the languages of teaching, learning and communication in a multilingual society such as ours, and to consider how language choices impact materially on people's lives.