According to the 2001 Census (Statistics South Africa, 2001:5), English is the home language of only 8,2% of South Africans. In a diverse country with 11 official languages, English acts as an important *lingua franca* in commerce both within the country as well as in international contacts. It follows that a solid knowledge of English opens definite social and economic doors for South African learners. Having one’s education in English will definitely give a learner ample time to become fluent in English. But is it really to the child’s advantage in the longer term? Does a fluency in English measure up to scientifically proven better cognitive development through home-language education?

For many people in South Africa, English has become the language that is used for the public impersonal domain, which can be seen as both a ‘concrete setting’ and ‘the general activity conventionally associated with the setting’ (Jeffery and Mshchrie, 2010:4). In this case, English is the language of economic activities, parliament, tertiary education, science and technology (The English Academy, 2009:1); it has become the language of status and economic power. Teaching English to African-language speakers, who form the biggest percentage of the lowest economic class, would thus be an important tool for economic growth.
Parent’s wishes

It is not surprising that many parents want to give their children a better chance by throwing them in at the deep end and wanting them to learn English in such a drastic way in school by having their whole education through English, especially if the child is not in an environment laden with English stimuli. This has been one of the main arguments against home-language education in South Africa. According to Heugh (2000:20) there is, however, ‘no scientific evidence to support the myth that the majority of parents want straight for only English’ education. On the contrary, as early as 1993 studies showed that only 22% of African parents wanted their children to receive their education through English (Heugh, 2000:16). A more recent study done by the Pan South African Language Bureau (PANSALB) in 2000 shows that only 7.6% of parents thought ‘it is more important that learners learn in English than in other languages’.

One of the first things that had to change after 1994 was the education policy. Equal education needed to be given to all in the new democratic country. Following the negative connotations of mother-tongue education in Bantu Education, the enormous costs and time needed to translate the syllabuses and develop the African languages to academic standards and lastly, the pressure to change the education system as soon as possible, it was inevitable that English as a language of learning and teaching would be utilised as a quick and cost-effective solution.

Thus, even if parents want home language education for their children, it is available neither in the curriculum material, nor as a language to take matric examinations in. The state is thus acting unconstitutionally in not providing such material as, according to Section 6(2) of the Constitution it is supposed to ‘take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of [African languages]’ and also ‘Everyone has the right to receive education in the
official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable’ (Section 29(2) of the Constitution).

This language issue, coupled with other issues like HIV/AIDS, poor support from home, low socio-economic circumstances, etc, has massive consequences for the youth of South Africa in the yearly decrease in the matric pass rate. By 2000 only 27% of learners who started school in Grade 1 finished with a matriculation certificate (Heugh, 2000:32). This relates to the argument posed by sociolinguists and applied linguists that cognitive development is negatively impacted by education through a language other than a child’s home language (Heugh, 2000:33 & The English Academy of South Africa, 2009:2,5).

In the Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (2003:11) it is emphasized that the learner’s ‘home language needs to be strengthened and developed so as to provide a sound foundation for learning additional languages’. This is confirmed by international scientific research which indicates that ‘children need at least 12 years [since birth] of learning their mother tongue’ (Heugh, 2000:29). This creates a basic knowledge of concepts, literacy and basic mathematic skills, something which has been at a worryingly low level the past few years. A sound foundation in home language strengthens the learner’s language with which he/she thinks and reasons, which can at a later stage be translated into English when their English competence is at a high enough level.

For this stage to be reached, ‘most pupils need 6-8 years of learning a second language before they can use it effectively as a medium of learning’ (Heugh, 2000:24). Where English is used as the language of learning and teaching, by the time that learners are competent enough in English to understand everything they are taught, they have missed the biggest part of the previous 6-8 years of education, which was supposed to have built a sound cognitive and content foundation on which
to build further knowledge.

Something else that should be considered is the quality of English education which most African language learners receive due to the fact that their teachers would also be second-language speakers of English. Second language speakers have a smaller vocabulary of English words at their disposal and have fewer words to express thoughts and concepts. Learners who have access to English only through the domain of the school will have fewer words to express their answers to questions in the matric exam than a second language learner receiving tuition from a home language English speaker. In practice, teachers would often be tempted to explain more difficult concepts (even in some cases all concepts) in the African language they share with their students so they can express themselves better and the learners can understand better. This deprives the learners of further vocabulary to express themselves in the matric exam as they can only write the matric exam in English or Afrikaans.

This does not mean that parents do not want their children to learn English; in the same study by the PANSALB in 2000, 42% of parents thought that ‘learners should have the opportunity to learn both their mother tongue and English equally well’ (Heugh, 2000:19). English is still, and will always be, a symbolic ‘gateway to a better life’ (Van der Walt, et al. 2009:18) in the multilingual context of South Africa.

Looking at English in this way, it could also be suggested that more elements of Black South African English be admitted into Standard South African English to enhance linguistic tolerance for people with an African language as their home language, but more importantly, to make English more accessible for African language speakers in terms of pronunciation and grammar structure. It is estimated that about half the English speakers in the world are second language speakers (Van der Walt et al., 2009:18-19), thus a perfect British or American grammar and pronunciation is no
longer required. Focus should shift to making the language accessible and able to enhance intercultural and international communication.

In line with the fact that children need 12 years of mother-tongue education and take 6-8 years to achieve Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in English, it can be suggested that mother-tongue education take place until the end of Grade 6 with English as an additional language ‘introduced as a subject in Grade 1’ (Department of Education, 2003:7). This will give learners a better opportunity to form a basis in their mother tongue. After this stage is complete, parents could be given the choice of the language of learning and teaching for their children in the GET and FET phases.

Being given a choice in GET and FET implies that there should be a choice of language for learning and teaching available. Currently the choice is between Afrikaans and English. The Education department needs to invest in the development of the African languages in South Africa and the translation of handbooks and study material. This can be done on a provincial level and could start with the biggest languages to make the implementation of such language development more practical and cost-effective.

An added option for the classroom could be the implementation of bilingual or multilingual education; using both the home language of the learner plus English in the classroom, making learners better equipped to handle academic material in English. This way the learners have the opportunity for optimum cognitive development coupled with a better competence in English in preparation for the public domain and English tertiary education. Multilingualism could furthermore enhance cognitive versatility. Implementation of multilingualism in schools would have to be decided upon by the governing bodies of schools according to the needs of the children in the school and the parents involved.
The purpose of Bantu education was the training of an uneducated mass of people for manual labour in South Africa. At the moment, with only 27% of learners starting school in South Africa being able to pass matric, of which only a small percentage have good enough marks to be admitted to universities and colleges, it can be argued that the current education system is doing much the same as Bantu education years ago. Until there is an equal value put to every language in education in South Africa, there will never be equal education in South Africa.

Bibliography


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