Graham Bam puts the main problem plain and simply in a letter to the Cape Times:

*The debate about the use of English as a medium of instruction is going nowhere.*

No more research, theories or proposals. We are running out of time. We have to make a decision. Yes, Jonathan Schrire (in a letter to the Cape Times) is right when he says that ‘this is an important education debate which has serious consequences if we get it wrong’. We know the pressure is on, but we have to choose a policy regarding languages in our schools and start implementing it without looking back. It’s time to go back to basic decision-making and look at all the positive consequences and all the negative consequences of the different options. Although decision-making of this magnitude is never that simple, wasting more time on this debate is only causing more harm, making the decision harder and the ramifications more serious.

As I see it, at the moment we have two major proposals each with its own fan base. First, we have the people who want English to be our medium of instruction in all of our schools. On the other hand we have the people supporting home language (or mother-tongue education). Last but not least, as with all decision-making, there are those few individuals that are voting for both, always looking for a midway, the best of both worlds.

The beautiful irony of this debate is that the supporters of
both English-medium and the mother-tongue supporters feel that their course of action or proposal is crucial for our country’s academic, economic, politic and social survival.

For the English-medium followers it is obviously better to have English as the medium of education in our schools to give our learners the necessary English proficiency to be able to get educated at tertiary level and to go even further and compete academically on international level. This argument makes sense since English is a global language and all the necessary academic books and articles are available in English. However, the mother-tongue supporters’ argument is just as valid. According to them and recent research, there is definitely a relationship between language and the cognitive development of children. In simple terms, this means that anyone that is not English will be disadvantaged if they do not receive education in their home language because concepts would be much harder for these children to grasp than for a person who home language is English. This is just not fair and is especially worrying since only a small portion of South African citizens are actually English-speaking.

According to the English-medium, group it would be beneficial for the country’s economy to have English as our schools medium of instruction. This means there will be no need to train teachers to be efficient in any of the country’s other official languages; it means there is no need for new translated textbooks. The mother-tongue group feels differently. They believe that it would be financially bad for our country to get so many teachers educated in English because not only do the teachers need to be capable of teaching second- or third-language learners but all teachers would also need to be English proficient, even the maths and science teachers, to help the second- or third-language learners to understand the subject specific languages and the content in order to fully grasp the different concepts.

The mother-tongue advocates argue that it would be without
doubt politically incorrect to make English the medium of instruction. They feel this way because it is in direct contradiction to our country’s law that says that all eleven languages in South Africa are officially equal in status, therefore they must also be equal in practice. Their opponents say that it would only complicate our political interactions locally and internationally if we isolate ourselves by all communicating in different languages.  

The first-language education group do not want to lose the uniqueness of our country and this is a possibility if home language is not taught in schools because without teachers’ positive promotion of home languages in school they would eventually not be spoken any more and the culture and traditions they represent would get lost; and that would lead to losing the diversity which makes our country unique. On the other hand, the mother-tongue approach would make communication so much easier in the long run and might even create unity in the future.  

Yes, these are all valid arguments on both sides, but this essay is not to make a decision or to convince you which approach is better and why, but rather to give a wake-up call to all, especially those focusing on the harmful consequences of each approach, to rather look at all the negative consequences of the time we are busy wasting on this debate. I am not saying it’s an easy decision to be made by any means, but it is necessary every once and a while to look at what damage the debate and the time spent on this debate is doing to our country, our schools and most importantly our children.  

English is one of the major global languages. English also happens to be the only major language to be found in the eleven official languages in South Africa. Therefore it makes sense that English has become South Africa’s lingua franca because of its usefulness internationally. This, however, has positive and negative consequences for our country. On the one hand, it is undeniably positive because it enhances our
international or global communication ability. On the other hand, it also poses a possible threat of our neglecting our other ten official languages and their associated cultures and traditions.

English, in becoming the South Africa’s lingua franca, poses the same threats as English becoming a world-wide common language, since our country’s rich diversity could be damaged by neglecting our other ten official languages. It is because of this negative consequence that all ten official languages in South Africa are regarded as equal in status to English. This, however, is only true in theory. Although all of our ten languages might be considered according to law as being equal, the dominant language still remains English although it is only the home language of a small portion of South Africans.

This spills over to education. It is well known that English is internationally the most predominant and significant academic language. This is seen in the fact that the majority of books in our libraries are in English. This academic value that English brings with it puts pressure on tertiary education institutions to use English. This again then has a ripple effect: Our school education needs to be in English so that the learners can be competent enough in English to succeed academically at Universities and other tertiary level education.

Therefore English in schools is something that needs a lot of consideration. If the relationship, shown by research, between mother-tongue instruction and cognitive development is taken seriously it is obvious that being taught English when it is not your home language, which is the case in most of our schools today, causes a problem of inequality between learners with different home languages. Research has shown that it is more beneficial for a learner with a mother tongue other than English to switch to a programme of instruction in English at a later stage after their mother tongue has been fully
developed. This, however, is more easily said than done. English, and the empowerment it brings with it, forces learners to join a programme of instruction in English at a much earlier stage than is best for their cognitive development. The other reason for this premature switch to English for English second-language learners is the fact that some domains or schools do not provide any form of education in their mother-tongue. One of the many suggestions being made by many groups such as, among others, the English Academy of Southern Africa is that, although a longer period of mother-tongue instruction is recommended for better cognitive development, it is also important that these home languages (if not English) ‘should be accompanied by a carefully worked out programme of instruction in English as a language subject that will enable the switch to English as language of learning to be easier’. The English Academy of South Africa also lays a lot of emphasis on ‘English across the curriculum’ where all the subjects are involved in the teaching of English and not just the English language period. One of the main concerns is the decline in the number of teachers qualifying to teach home languages other than English. Provision has to be made for these learners that do not speak English as their mother tongue.

All this emphasis on second-language education poses another threat: this time it is the possibility of neglecting English first-language learners in order to help English second-language learners come to terms with English. These are common problems in multilingual societies.

Therefore it is important to find a balance between the short- and long-term advantages of home-language education along with English second-language education. Yes, there are going to be some short term disadvantages because of the lack of adequate textbooks and competent teachers in indigenous languages, but being educated in their home language will help learners with their cognitive development and help to form a linguistic
basis on which English as a second language can be built. Our first priority should be to get the necessary textbooks and teachers in all the eleven languages and create a programme that focuses specifically on English as a second language without neglecting English as a first language. Yes, this still leaves English as the dominant language in South Africa, but let us try to forget about the negative associations of the past and focus on the future of our learners and what is best for them.

References:


English Academy of Southern Africa: English in a multilingual situation (published on the English Academy website)