The status of English in a multilingual South Africa

The status of English in a multilingual South Africa: Gatekeeper or liberator?

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In this paper, Professor Chetty argues that, instead of blaming poor literacy rates and academic performance on the fact that learners in disadvantaged communities are required to use English as their Language of Learning and Teaching, we should rather look to the low intake of teacher education students of indigenous languages at the Foundation Stage level to offer mother-tongue instruction, as well as the content and methodology of the teaching of English (which in turn brings into the question the quality of the training of English teachers).

This paper analyses language politics in South Africa in an attempt to understand what is happening in multilingual
classrooms. I humbly open this highly contested and ideological debate once again as I firmly believe that the language debate has to be more finely nuanced taking into consideration the realities of race, class and social marginalisation, together with the sensitivities of the language issue in SA and the unfortunate hegemonic stance taken against English.

Firstly, to contextual the debate, let’s look at how the past still informs the present with regards to compulsory mother-tongue instruction followed by circumscribed multilingualism. Education policy-makers in the 1950s made mother-tongue education a key principle of state policy, a move that may have been applauded, had the context of its implementation been different.

For practical reasons, African schoolchildren also had to have mastered a level of competence in the official languages, Afrikaans and English, that would make the country governable and ease communication in the workplace. African children therefore had to switch from mother tongue to English or Afrikaans for high school, a feat that research shows usually ensures barely functional competence in the target language.

In the context of the apartheid project, mother-tongue education was seen as part of a cynical strategy of divide-and-rule by diminishing access to the language of power, English, and lowering standards of education to ensure that African scholars were ill-equipped to participate in economic activity beyond manual labour levels. As apartheid education policy evolved and mother-tongue universities were established in ethnically defined regions, these institutions were widely seen by the African majority and their political activists as academically second rate, and tools of apartheid social engineering. Unsurprisingly, when ANC activists eventually returned from exile in the 1990s they advocated a single nationwide medium of instruction, English, and elimination of
It is evident that language was a contested factor to the apartheid discourse.

What are the language dynamics post 1994?

South Africans had to rethink their identities on a number of levels given the recent history of political freedom, economic liberalisation and social development. There is a sense in which this identity taking and identity formation in SA is a profoundly fraught experience. This is particularly the case with respect to race and class and it takes sharp expression in the language practices of individuals and groups. We see this clearly in young people’s use of language and the ways that they are schooled. The school system itself is complex in terms of language politics. The system that has emerged post 1994 is one where race has not gone away but has been significantly modified by social class. Permitted to charge school fees by the SA Schools Act, former white schools in particular have reconstructed themselves as schools for the new and expanded South African middle class. They have become racially diverse, which is an important development, but most of them have retained their elite identities. A Human Science Research Council study (Sekete et al. 2001, 27) shows that 60% of black and coloured children do not attend the school nearest to them, in other words, they actively evade them, informed by the manufactured desire for the school elsewhere. These children choose to access schools with English as medium of instruction because they regard it as crucial for cultivating the necessary aspirant dispositions that will allow entry into formal middle-class employment and lifestyles (see Fataar 2007a). A key question in this scenario as asked by the NEPI document in 1992 is: Has the enforced mother-tongue medium of instruction during apartheid cemented the view of African language medium education as inferior in the eyes of African parents?

Along with democracy in 1994 came a celebrated constitution enshrining 11 official languages, which both recognized and
promoted South Africa’s de facto multilingualism. The constitution is supportive of the ‘destabilisation of the hegemony of English’ and promotes the use of African languages in different domains of society. In alignment with this, the Dept of Ed’s Language in Education Policy promoted additive bilingualism, and the use of mother tongue as the language of teaching and learning in the early years of schooling. However, this has not been successful in many cases, as no clear guidelines have been provided on how to implement the policy. Although the policy is potentially positive, many teachers, teacher education and parents wrestle with the consequences of handing over the responsibility for Language of Learning and Teaching policy formulation to school governing bodies, which are not adequately informed, trained or equipped to make such key decisions in disadvantaged contexts. The language policy has had very little impact in practice. Rather, the status of English is growing, witnessed in its widespread use in high status domains of politics, the media and education.

The history of mother-tongue education in South Africa therefore makes language policy extremely complex, giving rise to baffling reactions from parents, to efforts to instantiate language rights in schooling. There is still a widespread suspicion among parents, especially the poor, that mother-tongue education will stifle their children’s aspirations for a better life. SGBs still choose English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in more than half the schools in South Africa, although English is the home language of only 7% of the population. Linguists have yet to convince communities of the benefits of mother-tongue education, and crucially, the resources to support it have yet to be developed beyond basic levels of literacy.

The tragedy is that, having chosen English as the LoLT, the level of English offered and mastered in most schools still reflects inadequate functionality for meeting the aspirations
of those wanting to move out of poverty. This may be partly attributable to the quality of learning in the mother tongue that has preceded the switch to English. There is a serious shortage of resources: qualified African mother-tongue foundation phase teachers, as well as a range of progressively conceptually challenging genres of children’s literature that facilitate engagement, vocabulary development, experience of alternative perspectives and world views, flexible use of language structures and modelling of text for different purposes.

To effectively support the acquisition of a first additional language as a language of learning, the learning in mother tongue must be richer than the level expected in the target language. The learner must be able to find the resources in the mother tongue to match the resources that have to be comprehended in the target language. If these resources are not available in the mother tongue, it is reasonable to conclude that the learner needs to be initiated into the Language of Learning and Teaching as early as possible, so that it becomes as effective for learning as a mother tongue should be.

Pinky Makoe found in her study of language discourses in a multilingual primary school that the value attached to linguistic competence in English renders some learners ‘successful’ and others unsuccessful. This means that competence in English as the language of learning and teaching is seen to be equivalent to a more favourable position of identity. Those who possess this kind of competence are privileged and engender more authority in relation to other learners.

The reality is that, although the significance of mother-tongue education is widely acknowledged and encouraged, it remains a thorny issue for most parents. This is especially so for African parents.
There is currently a great need to reinforce a critical literacy paradigm in the South African public education system given the socio-historical and political context. The unequal access to resources based on race and class continues to produce privilege as well as poor scholastic performance. Socially constructed patterns of power have been heightened, hence the need to understand the effects of power, the replacement of race with class, the lack of equity of access to public schooling and the need for redress at classroom level. For example, in 2006 a standard literacy test was conducted in all schools in the Western Cape. Ex-Model-C school learners achieved an 82.9% pass rate while in former coloured schools the rate was 26.6% and in black schools 3.7%. This is evident of the need to be more vigilant with our efforts to eradicate racism and entrench democracy. Less than 10% of public schools in South Africa have functional libraries of any kind (Department of Education’s 2007 NEIMS Report). These public schools that have libraries are the former model-C schools that are able to establish libraries and employ librarians through their own funds, collected through fees.

Children who grow up in communities that are embedded in orality develop different faculties with language, which although equally powerful resources for making meaning, are not equally valued by the school system when compared to middle class literacy norms (Heath, 1983). These children’s literacy abilities are not used as a resource in schools. Bordieu rightly points out that the school system privilege some children over others, hence marginalising the social capital of the children disadvantaged by the social system. School literacy is therefore not neutral. When we quote statistics with regards to literacy e.g. the Pirls test, we fall into the trap of what Street (1984) referred to as the ‘autonomous’ model of literacy, and we naively ignore the fact that literacy is not an issue of measurement or of skills but a social practice that varies from one context to another. In
South Africa it is the context of learners who are privileged in terms of class versus those that are poor, disadvantaged and largely black.

Providing English knowledge is legitimate and it empowers learners. Good command of English will aid in minimizing socio-economic disadvantage, especially within the post-apartheid context of South Africa. English can also be seen as an attempt to unify a people susceptible to be divided along ethno-linguistic lines. In a sense one can argue that English equalizes our society. Ideally, because of our location on the African continent, an African language should be playing this role and indeed, current efforts to promote African languages into higher status functions should be encouraged. However, the fact remains that at least in the foreseeable future, English will continue to be a major language in this country and the world at large. One can therefore argue that imperatives for the foregrounding of English as language of teaching and learning should be examined so as to provide every South African child with an opportunity to master the language that might control his/her access to the means of socio-economic and educational empowerment.

I contend that those among us that are most vociferous about English as killer of other languages, who play the role of defenders of the victims of epistemic violence of the empire, ironically use only English in our righteous battle. One cannot leave one’s own baggage – or historical, geographic and class positioning – when encountering the marginalised and disadvantaged. What is advocated is critical negotiation from within, an engagement with and critique of hegemonic discourses and representations. We need to be vigilant of our politically correct denunciation of (neo)colonialism derived from an unexamined identification with, or benevolence towards, the subaltern (Moore-Gilbert, 1997:112). This acknowledgement of complicity (and complexity) also affects the way we address imperialism: while never underestimating
its destructive impact, we should also recognise the positive effects too, in this case, the enabling violations of English (Spivak, 1994:277).

Is English a liberator or a gatekeeper?

I differ from Hilary Janks that African children’s learning and their sense of identity are compromised when they have to learn through the medium of English (2010:11). In fact, the struggle was not against English, but the forced use of Afrikaans as medium of instruction to maintain racial domination. Even in the promotion of African languages during apartheid, it was not a linguistic or language rights imperative, but rather a political tool of the regime to foster ethnic divisions and to keep black learners away from English which was a language of power and access. As a form of literacy redress, we should be advocating good quality English education that integrates both the linguistic and social capital of African children.

The ability of South Africans to communicate in English facilitates the evolution of a nation state. English is the language of the state and government documentation appears mostly in English. From the perspective of Bourdieu (1993) this represents cultural capital. English is therefore central to those who wish to succeed within the parameters of state-sanctioned power. Those who have good command of both English and an African language stand even a better chance of success. It is therefore not surprising that as early as 1991, the NEPI report shows that significant numbers of black parents have opted for English for their children, even from the first year of primary school (NEPI 1991:13f).

We would be highly irresponsible if we did not give learners mastery of English, and this in no way advocates the marginalisation of other languages. Together with mastery of
English, we need to provide a critical view of the status of English as a global language (Granville et al, 1998). Linguistic diversity should be fostered. The social interest at work here is empowering black learners with the dominant linguistic capital of the country so that they benefit and they are advantaged in the school and higher education system. It is ironical that it is mostly white learners who only have English as a language and most black children speak African languages at home. Yet, the linguistic debates have centred on the deficiency of African children not knowing English and not on white children not being able to speak an African language. More realistically, learners who do not have an African language in South Africa are deprived of the opportunity for meaning construction within the African context that forms their life world.

English does not perpetuate the privileged status of an elite class, on the contrary, English promotes structural-economic development and social inter-group and inter-personal interactions, vital components for reconciliation and growth in a new democracy. In spite of postcolonial critique by language activists, English does not regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups as South African speakers of English are not defined on the basis of language. All South Africans have access to English and an indigenous language. As such they may decide to claim any of the official languages as theirs.

Also, it is fiscal reasons that restrict the appointment of new language teachers to ensure the implementation of the language policy. Language policy seems to have simply moved African languages from the margin to the centre (on paper only) as a form of redress and there has been little training of African language teachers. Of serious concern is the low intake of teacher education students at foundation phase level to offer mother-tongue instruction in indigenous languages. What is needed is a concerted programme to ensure quality
intake for teacher training and an effort by the state to reduce material inequities in schools as a step to attract quality teacher education students. The quality training of language teachers is unfortunately not foregrounded as there are more serious issues within the complexity of teacher education to be addressed.

Teachers are unwilling to embrace new methodologies and the concern is more around credentialism as opposed to gaining new knowledge in the increased interest in in-service programmes. Universities too, played the neo-liberal game by awarding certificates without adequate re-training of teachers as the concern was more on marketisation and massification. It is therefore not strange that in recent literacy tests in this province, it was found that the teacher knowledge was not much higher than learner knowledge in primary schools. The findings of this study are still embargoed through pressure by the teacher unions. The situation is very complex as it is not only the learner literacy levels that need to be addressed, but also the literacy of the teachers. There has been little retraining of teachers with regards to the multilingual nature of open schools (pre-1994 South African schools were largely segregated). English second language learners are marginalized and silenced in such contexts due to poor language teacher preparation, not due to English as language of instruction.

There should be greater accent on cognitive/academic language proficiency in the training of teachers, along with the reconceptualisation of the role of languages in teaching and learning. Language courses are limited to archaic pedagogics and consist of formal aspects of language, limited literature study and basic communication in English. The silences in these language courses include semantics and functional meaning, academic language proficiency, pragmatic aspects of proficiency, bilingualism and code-switching.

Meaning construction (Freire 1971), a theory fundamental to critical literacy, is the basis of context-embedded teaching,
especially within post-colonial contexts. The teacher has to be trained to encourage learners to negotiate meaning and interpret texts. In her study of language and learning science in South Africa, Probyn (2006) concluded that teachers indicated a strong preference for English as the language of teaching and learning. The lack of training in teaching in second language was evident and teaching resources were limited. Teaching cannot be done in a language in which the teacher does not have an appropriate level of mastery.

The contextual frame that continues to condition English teaching in post-colonial contexts is scary and must be addressed in teacher training:

– Pedagogy is based on European models;
– The most prevalent teaching methodology is the transmission mode;
– The prescribed texts are drawn from predominantly middle-class, high-culture positions;
– Classrooms are characterized by a polarity between first language and second language speakers whose cultural capital is excluded;
– A culture of silence results from non-mother-tongue based learners losing confidence. (Ashworth and Prinsloo 1994:125-126)

The move should be towards creative literacy. If learning to read and write is to constitute an act of knowing, the learners must assume from the beginning the role of creative subjects. It is not a matter of memorising and repeating given syllables and phrases, but rather of reflecting critically on the process of reading and writing itself, and on the profound significance of language (Freire, 1972a). Much of the curriculum reform in English education thus far was simply altering a reading list. Of course there was also the doomed
educational experiment with OBE and countless reviews that had limited impact on the country’s literacy levels.

The implication of a critical literacy approach will shift the focus from listening and reading to reading and creation. Learners have for too long been taught to read and understand. Reading for the creation of texts has been ignored, perhaps historically because of its political implications. Incidentally, much of the literacy tests focus on writing through answering contextual type questions. There is a lack of emphasis on writing in the school programme, yet the testing of writing skills is foregrounded in literacy tests and this raises questions around validity of the scores.

If it is to be a ‘liberator’, English should be a resource to be appropriated and owned by all, not just the elite, to be used as a gateway to the wider world. For this to happen, creative solutions (and massive expenditure) would have to be applied to the teaching of English, particularly in the township and rural schools. If well managed, mastery of English in disadvantaged settings may be an invaluable tool of exchange between those living on the margins of society and those who are part of the global village.

Conclusion

A relevant language curriculum within a post-colonial context has to take into cognizance not only the local cultural diversity but also the global store of knowledge that characterizes the heterogeneity of our common humanity. Edward Said notes accurately the predicament of a racial and ethnic version of cultural nationalism:

To assume that the ends of education are best advanced by focusing principally on our own separateness, our own ethnic identity, culture and traditions ironically places us where as subaltern, inferior, or lesser races we had been placed by nineteenth-century racial theory, unable to share in the
The search for relevant knowledge (like English), should go beyond repudiating the west in favour of recovering and reconstructing Africa’s cultural heritage. Concomitant with that, we have to be extra vigilant of the west with their politically correct denunciation of English as neo-colonialism and our own colleagues who continue to see English from a hegemonic lens. This benevolent stance towards African languages may be seen as patronising and ill-informed. We agree that we need to address imperialism and the destructive impact English has had on indigenous languages. However as Spivak maintains, we need to recognise the positive effects of English and see it as an enabling violation.