

The use of African languages in education - problems and issues
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The pedagogical soundness of the use of mother-tongues/home languages as languages of instruction is beyond question. The superior educational results that it ensures have been recorded time and again. Moreover, in a situation where schooling is near universal, it is crucial for the maintenance of linguistic diversity and effecting linguistic rights that local languages be present in the school system.

The South African education system is characterised by a complex history that has made the issue of the medium of instruction / LoLT for learners who are not native speakers of English and who belong to communities indigenous to the country - particularly black learners speaking a Southern African Bantu language - a burning one. According to the regulations in place since 1996, any of the country's 11 official languages may be used as LoLT up to Grade 12/NSC but practically, the use of African languages as LoLT is supported only for the first 3 grades (Foundation Phase). In addition, individual schools are given the last say regarding language (viz. as LoLT and as subjects of study).

It has been found that the teaching of African Languages as LoLT leaves often a lot to be desired. Not only is there is shortage of recent, attractive and well-conceived material but teachers are rarely prepared to handle the discrepancy between the LoLT – a normative variety of a given language - and the real linguistic practices of the learners, who speak the local, mixed variety or come from a different linguistic background altogether. In recent years, a significant number of schools in townships and rural areas have opted for a straight for English policy.

These combined factors have contributed to questionable results in terms of literacy acquisition in both the mother-tongue and in English, and has possibly also led to a loss of learning ability. Furthermore, this situation may also be threatening the transmission of languages to succeeding generations as African families from all walks of life seem to be making English their home languages - in a bid to improve their children's chances in school and, they believe, their professional future.

To react against this state of affairs, the Department of Education has put in place programmes such as the Foundation for Learning Campaign, which seek to promote early MT literacy through the provision of readers in all official languages, and is planning an extension of the use of African languages as LoLT up to grade 6 in pilot schools across the country. Teacher-training in using African languages as LoLT and in teaching them as subjects of study is also undergoing a revamping with many universities reintroducing African languages streams.

We propose to look at two main issues: (a) the requirements for the successful implementation of a mother-tongue policy in education, and (b) the teaching of African languages as subjects for native speakers. In the first, attention will be given specifically to the training of teachers to teach in African languages in content subjects/non-language

specific subjects, and in the second, the appropriateness of the language of text-books/readers in primary schools will be dealt with.

These two aspects will be the themes of two interlinked one-day workshops to take place during 2009 & 2010 at the University of Pretoria.

As part of the project, we also intend to put the SA situation in perspective through a comparison with countries in the region that confront similar problems and are also promoting recourse to local languages.