The possibility of using african languages as media of teaching and learning in South Africa.

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Abstract

This study sets out to examine the possibility of using African languages as media of teaching and learning in South African schools. Literature is consistent that (a) language is a crucial means of communication and gaining access to important knowledge and skills, and (b) mother tongue is the only language that promotes effective teaching and learning and that any language, which is not a mother tongue, is a barrier to teaching and learning. In South Africa, there are nine African official languages, but English is the media of instruction used by South African learners, which is a barrier to teaching and learning. This study revealed that using one or two African languages may improve teaching, learning, and the academic performance of the learners, but the problem is how to implement because it will be difficult to use many African languages as media of instruction. The use of nine African languages as media of instruction in South Africa will promote tribalism, which was dominant during the apartheid era, and it will be costly to the government. Therefore, this study supports the use of English as a media of instruction because it will promote unity in South Africa, it will not be costly, and it is an international language.

KEYWORDS: Academic Performance, African Languages, Media of Instruction, Multilingualism, Scientific Terminology.

1 Introduction

Media of instruction has always been a contentious issue in education in South Africa. It is a contentious issue because South Africa is a multilingual country, which consists of at least twenty-four African, Asian and European languages. These languages include Afrikaans, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Isindebele, isiXhosa, IsiZulu, Italian, Khilobedu, Northern Sotho, Portuguese, Setswana, siSwati, Southern Sotho, Tamil, Telugu, Tshivenda, Urdu Xitsonga and Yiddish (Reagan, 2001). Language diversity is, therefore, a major challenge in South Africa because it is difficult to have 24 media of instruction in South Africa. According to McLaren and Ovando (1999), language is a crucial means of communication, cognitive development and gaining access to important knowledge and skills. This implies that language can promote or impede the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

In order to understand the media of instruction in South Africa today, it is necessary to look at the historical background of languages in schools in South Africa. Most written evidence on language in education comes from the arrival of Europeans in the Cape, especially the Dutch settlement in 1652 (Olivier, 2009). Mainly Dutch (Afrikaans after 1925) and English were used in schools. African languages started to be recognised during the apartheid era in South Africa where mother tongue education was proposed for the first couple of years. The apartheid government of South Africa discriminated against indigenous and minority language groups by decreeing the Bantu Education Act (1953), which stipulated that black learners should receive mother tongue teaching in lower and higher primary grades with transition to English and Afrikaans thereafter (Tshotsho, 2013). Following South Africa's transition to democracy, the ANC government sought to reverse this form of discrimination by initiating a multilingual language policy as stipulated in the Constitution (Madiba, 2005). It is important to note that the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, granted equal status to eleven languages as official languages, namely, Sepedi, Tshivenda, Sesotho, Setswana, IsiZulu, siSwati, Xitsonga, isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Most learners in South Africa

are bilingual or multilingual and receive education in a language that is not their first language (Pan South African Language Board [PANSALB], 2000).

The main problem of this study is the use of English as a media of instruction by South African learners in South African schools. English is the dominant media of instruction in education, but it is the mother tongue of only 8.2% of the population (Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2010). English and Afrikaans speaking learners in South Africa are currently able to complete their entire schooling in their mother tongue, while speakers of African languages are less fortunate (Cleghorn & Evans, 2014). Consequently, if a non-familiar or foreign language is used as a media of instruction, it becomes a barrier to effective teaching and learning. In South Africa, one of the reasons attributed to the continuous decline in student performance and low educational outcomes in most public schools is the use of English as a media of teaching and learning. Brock-Utne (2000), Ngugi (1986) and Prah (2007), who claim that children learn better when the language used for instruction in the teaching and learning process is a familiar language, which people speak in their everyday lives, also support this view. Many South African learners perform poorly academically because of lack of English proficiency. Heugh (2002) argues that the overall poor matriculation results of African learners in South Africa since 1994 are because of language barriers. Mass media such as television and radio are the only opportunities for learners to hear English. Moreover, learners only speak, read and write in English only in the classroom. Furthermore, many black teachers are unable to teach effectively in English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) due to the lack of English proficiency; they resort to rote learning, drill and the use of more than one language to teach (Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2010). South African learners experience problems because they cannot study in their first language (Van Heerden, 1996). These learners are not fluent in English, the tuition media of their choice. They lack a sufficient command of English to succeed at school. This leads to problems regarding effective comprehension of the content of academic material, analysis of questions and presentations of answers. This study is guided by the main question:

Is it possible to use African languages as media of instruction in South Africa?

2 Methodology

This study is based on the constructivist paradigm. According to Rahi (2017), constructivism or interpretivism is based on the belief that reality is constructed by social factors and people's perceptions of it. In other words, individuals with their own varied backgrounds, assumptions and experiences contribute to the construction of reality. The study is also based on phenomenological research design, which will be used to change people's understanding about media of instruction and allow the researcher to reflect on and analyse the possibility of using African languages as media of instruction in South Africa. This study also used a qualitative research approach. The population of this study embraced all the teachers at the selected schools. Purposive sampling method was used to select the sample of this study, which consisted of ten educators and five School Governing Body members from five selected secondary schools in Mamelodi Township. Individual interviews were used to collect the data from the participants.

3 Results of the study

The data analysis of teachers' responses to the interview questions revealed the following findings:

(a) If all nine African languages are used as media of instruction, is South Africa not going back to the tribalism (homelands) of the apartheid era?
All the participants indicated that it would bring back tribalism in South Africa because the learners and teachers will be separated according to their languages. One of the participants responded as follows: "*I don't support African languages as media of instruction in our schools because the homeland system will be brought back. There will be classes of various languages, and this will promote tribalism and hatred.*"

(b) Is it possible to use all nine African languages as media of instruction in South Africa?
Most of the participants indicated that it is impossible to use African languages as media of instruction because they are many, they will promote tribalism, there are no resources, and the learners will have trouble in universities. One of the participants said,

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> *No, it is not possible to use African languages as media of instruction because there are 9 African languages in South African. It will not be possible to use three, six or in African languages in one class. More teachers will be appointed for one subject only and there are no textbooks in African languages.*

(c) If African languages are used as a media of instruction in one school, are the classrooms going to be organised according to African languages?

All the participants indicated that the classes cannot be organised according to the languages of learners because there cannot be nine languages in one class and nine teachers cannot teach the same subject in nine languages in one class. This view was confirmed by one participant who said:

> *We really support the use of African languages as media of instruction, but it will not be possible or easy to implement it. If we use nine languages in one school, it means that the classes will be organised tribalistically. We don't want our learners to be divided according to their tribes, but they must be divided according to subjects.*

(d) Are there resources such as textbooks and teaching aids for all subjects in nine languages?

All the participants indicated that there are currently no resources such as textbooks for the nine African languages and it will be too costly for the government to have the resources. The perception was confirmed by one participant who responded as follows.

> *Madam Researcher our school don't* [sic] *have Biology textbooks and teaching aids in Sepedi, IsiZulu, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, Setswana, IsiXhosa and IsiNdebele. I have also never seen these textbooks in bookshops. It is good to teach in African languages, but it won't be easy to implement it.*

(e) Are universities going to be transformed like schools? If not, are the learners going to cope with changing the media of instruction in all subjects at university level?

All the participants indicated that it will be impossible to transform the universities like schools because universities always conform to international standards. This opinion was supported by one participant who responded as

follows: "*I don't think that it will be advisable to transform universities into African languages. A university graduate must be able to work in any country of the world and African languages are not international languages.*"

(f) What is the best strategy that can be used to implement the mother tongue of African learners as media of instruction in South Africa in order to improve their learning and academic performance?

All the participants indicated that there is no best strategy to implement the mother tongue of African learners as media of instruction in South Africa because there are many African languages in South Africa. They recommended that the status quo should be maintained and one of them said: "*I don't see any best strategy to avoid tribalism, when we divide our classes into African languages.*"

The data analysis of School Governing Body (SGB) members' responses to the interview questions revealed the following findings:

(a) Is it possible to use African languages as media of instruction in South African schools?

All the School Governing Body (SGB) members agreed that it is good to use African languages as media of instruction but implementing it will have negative consequences for their children because their children will not get employment in the private sector where one must have one's knowledge and skills in English. One School Governing Body (SGB) member responded as follows: "*Yes, it is good to teach and learn in your mother tongue but dividing classes into ethnic groups is not good because it promotes tribalism, and it will pose many challenges to our children when they finish school.*"

(b) If all nine African languages are used as media of instruction, is South Africa not going back to tribalism (homelands) of the apartheid era?

Most of the School Governing Body (SGB) members emphasised that using nine African languages in our schools will take South Africa back to apartheid era, which will promote tribalism. One of them responded as follows:

> *If we divide our schools or classes according to African languages, we are diving the nation. We do not want to go back to homeland system.*

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We must continue to use one international language as media of instruction, which is English.

(c) If nine languages are used as a media of instruction in one school, are the classrooms going to be organised according to African languages?

Most of the participants agreed that the classrooms will be organised according to African languages, but it will have severe consequences on our learners. One of the participants responded as follows: "*I don't support organising classes according to 9 languages. I am very afraid the school will become the playground of differences, fights, and murders.*"

(d) Are there resources such as textbooks and teaching aids for all subjects in nine languages?

All the School Governing Body (SGB) members indicated that they have never seen textbooks and other resources in various African languages in the secondary schools. They indicated that the government will be forced to use more money to translate the books and resources into nine African languages. One of the School Governing Body (SGB) members responded as follows: "*No, there are no textbooks and other resources in nine African languages in secondary schools. I am sure that such books are not found in bookshops.*"

(e) Are the universities going to be transformed like the schools? If not, are the learners going to cope with changing the media of instruction in all subjects at university level?

Most of the participants indicated that if African languages are used media of instruction, learners are going to be in trouble because universities will never change international languages to use African languages. One School Governing Body (SGB) member confirmed to this view as follows: "*Universities will never change because they must conform to international standards.*"

(f) What is the best strategy that can be used to implement the mother tongue of African learners as media of instruction in South Africa in order to improve their learning and academic performance?

Most of the participants indicated that there will never be a suitable strategy to implement the mother tongue of African learners as media of instruction in schools. One of the participants

confirmed to this view as follows: "*I support what our government is doing. African languages must only be used in the Foundation Phase because they are not international languages. The current strategy is very fine.*"

4 Discussion

The teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members were requested to share their views on the possibility of using African languages in our schools in South Africa. Despite the major value of mother tongue, the teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members our schools cannot use nine African languages in one school or class and that strategy will bring back tribalism in South Africa because the learners and teachers will be separated according to their languages. All the participants also indicated that there are currently no resources such as textbooks for the nine African languages in the secondary schools and bookstores and it will be too costly for the government to have the resources. This view supports what is currently happening in South Africa, because many learners are complaining about the shortage of textbooks in one language.

The teachers and parents believe there is no best strategy to implement the mother tongue of African learners as media of instruction in South Africa because there are many African languages in South Africa. However, the teachers and School Governing Body (SGB) members agreed that it is viable to use African languages as media of instruction but implementing it will have negative consequences for their children because their children will not find employment in the private sector where one must be knowledgeable and proficient in English. Their views are supporting Olivier (2009), who asserts that it is necessary for learners to receive education in English because it is an international language, job markets demand knowledge of English, studies cannot be completed at secondary and tertiary levels in African languages and there are no resources to accommodate more languages that are African. Finally, the participants indicated that if African languages are used as media of instruction, learners are going to be in trouble because universities will never change international languages to use African languages.

In this study, the participants emphasised that in South Africa, one cannot use nine African languages in schools as media of instruction because it will promote tribalism. It is therefore, recommended that the government of South Africa should continue to use English because it will prevent many challenges, problems and obstacles that may occur when using nine African language as media of instructions in pour schools. In summary, the government of South Africa took a very wise decision to use English as media of instruction in South Africa because English is an international language, which prevents tribalism amongst the Africans.

5 Conclusion

This study was prompted by the use of English as a media of instruction in South African schools and in the meanwhile, there are other 9 official languages namely: Xitsonga, Tshivenda, IsiZulu, Setswana, siSwati, IsiXhosa, isiNdebele, Southern Sotho and Northern Sotho. The main purpose of this article was to explore the possibility of using African languages as media of instruction in South Africa. The findings of this study revealed that South African government has taken an informed decision to use English as media of instruction, because there are nine African languages, which cannot be implemented in one class or school, and because the use of English may evade many challenges such as tribalism and high-cost resources. Even though it will be difficult to implement all the nine South African official languages as according to the participates of this paper, more research is needed on how African languages can be implemented in South African schools as a media of instruction. Most of the South African citizens wish that one day their children will receive education in their home languages or mother tongues in a form of a media of instructions.

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