

## Chapter #18

### LEARNING IN HOME LANGUAGE: PREFERENCES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this study is to investigate children and parents' preferences of language of learning and teaching (LOLT) in Grades 1 – 3 (aged between six and eight years), in Foundation Phase. This study is a survey in which questionnaires and interviews were conducted to collect data from identified stakeholders. The sample consisted of fifty learners, forty parents, thirty school heads, hundred and fifty Foundation Phase teachers and twenty Early Childhood Development teachers. Respondents were purposively selected from metropolitan, township and rural schools in Motheo district in Free State province in South Africa. The findings were that learners and parents preferred English as the language of instruction at Foundation Phase. The implications of these findings are discussed.

*Keywords:* bilingualism, home language, monolingualism, perceptions, attitudes.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In South Africa, parents are permitted to choose the language in which their children are to be educated (Government Gazette, 2002); but here is a specific group of parents demand that their children are educated in English (Heugh, 2010). This is partly due to global prestige of English as a medium of international communication, language of business, and pre-requisite for employment (Bhoi, 2014).

Bilingual indigenous-English speaking children often have early verbal input in indigenous language; and English is introduced once they enter school and develops subsequently through English literacy instruction (Ndamba, 2008; Khosa, 2012). The language situation of these children is termed both “emergent bilingual” and English second language learners (EL2) as they first encounter a new language when they go to school and have limited oral proficiency in that language (Bialystok, Martin, & Viswanathan, 2005; Bachore, 2014), as opposed to other bilingual learners who have encountered both languages before scholastic instruction begins. Not much work has been done on parents and pupils' language preferences in a bilingual set up at the elementary level in South Africa. Hence, this study sought to investigate unexamined early childhood bilingual education issues in South Africa, where there is concern about poor performance by pupils in both L1 and L2 language arts.

### **1.1. Attitudes toward learning through Mother tongue**

The success of a mother tongue instruction policy relied mostly on people's perception towards home language and English as First additional language. According to Khosa (2012), there are number of issues that play a significant role in influencing people's attitudes towards learning in mother tongue. The historical and political background was active in influencing mother tongue learning. The previous apartheid language policies adopted the use of Afrikaans/English from the first grade or only encouraged the use of an African language as a medium of instruction in the lower grades in the primary school. This scenario can be regarded as the explanation behind the negative perception on mother tongue learning.

According to Ndamba (2008) "attitudes can be created through functions that people perceive particular languages as performing" (p.45). His observation stems from the African context, where he regarded official and local languages as in direct conflict with each other. They are not complementing each other. In other words, English is regarded as better than other local languages in terms of its social, political and economic function. It is often associated with power and success (Ndamba, 2008; Rahman & Asmari, 2014).

#### **1.1.1. Learner Attitudes**

According to Ndamba (2008), Westermann (1940) in Ngara (1982) was among the first people to note that there was a danger in using European languages as a medium of instruction for African children, who even at primary school level, did not attach any importance to the mother tongue, which they were prepared to get rid of as quickly as possible.

In Zimbabwe, Ngara (1982) in Ndamba (2008) observed that students had negative attitudes towards African languages. This was evidenced by the way the University of Rhodesia students in the 60s used to regard an English Honours degree as prestigious whereas a degree in Shona had a low reputation. Ngara (1982) goes further to say that even white government officials were aware that Africans had negative attitudes towards their own language. Rwambiwa's (1996) findings confirmed that pupils often humiliated teachers of African languages by expressing their (pupil) negative attitudes towards learning indigenous languages. He argues that such attitudes, expressed by students towards the mother tongue, are encouraged by the language policy of 1987 which requires students to learn all subjects in English beginning in grade in grade four.

In Tanzania, where education in primary schools is conducted in Kiswahili, studies by Roy-Campbell (1996) show that students favour retention of English as a medium of instruction at secondary level. Roy-Campbell (1996) found that many Tanzanian students who said that English should be maintained as medium of instruction could hardly carry out a conversation in English with the researcher. Such sentiments expressed by students who could barely communicate in English can only be attributed to attitudes. Roy-Campbell (1996) goes on to say that students do not value their mother tongue; hence they would prefer to learn using a language that they do not comprehend even when given the option to use their own language in learning.

In South Africa, the situation is not different. The research conducted by Setati and Langa (2006), showed that South African learners were in favour of the use of English in learning Mathematics in high school. The participants in that research could not see the importance of indigenous languages.

In September 2009, former Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande said that those taking up African languages at University level were sometimes perceived by their peers as 'second-grade students' (Sapa, 2009). These are few examples of learners' attitudes towards English as a medium of instruction.

### **1.1.2. Parental and Community attitudes**

Regarding the West Africa, Fyle (1976) in Ndamba (2008) says that during the colonial period community attitudes were developed when everything pertaining to Europeans was regarded as excellent and worthy of imitation, whereas all that which belonged to the local African community was considered to be inferior. People in the post-colonial countries still identify education with former colonial languages as evident in new South Africa and Namibia, where Roy-Campbell (1996), Granville et al (1998), Setati (2005) observed that African still resist mother tongue education in favour of English which they view as a language of knowledge. Although children from non-English environments speaking backgrounds have potentially rich linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the communities do not indicate an awareness of such linguistic richness because of attitudes which range from ignorance or indifference to support and pride, and this somehow affects children's learning (Murray & Smith, 1988).

In South Africa, research carried out by Ngidi (2007) and Ndamba (2008) revealed that parents from schools of Mthunzi circuit (KwaZulu-Natal) had positive attitude towards the use of English as language of learning and teaching and as additional language in schools. Most of the parents from this Navilsig Combined School regarded African languages as of no use to their children. They cited employability and international communication exposure as their main concern. The learners also supported their parents by saying that English is an international language. It became ironic in the sense that organisations like PANSALB and the commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities were busy advocating the importance of mother tongue learning. All South African language policies were endorsing the freedom to learn in Home language from Grade R- 3 in Foundation Phase (Early Childhood Development) stream. Part of this study focused on learner's language preferences since these children are the direct beneficiaries of language policy which recognizes the significance of learning in the mother tongue in the lower grades. Parents' views were also sought to establish if there is consistency between language policy and parents' perception of the role of the mother tongue in teaching and learning.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the language preferences in South Africa. It wanted to establish learners and parents' perception and attitude on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Policies and a lot of research confirm the importance of Home language learning at initial education.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This study used a mix method design and both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain data. A mixed method is a procedure used to collect and analyse both quantitative and qualitative research to understand the problem identified in the study (Creswell, 2008). The purpose of mixed methods in this study is to explore the problem that relate to both aspects of the approach and do so accurately.

The sampling consisted of fifty (50) learners aged between six and eight years in grade 1 -3 (10 in grade 1 and 20 in both grade 2 and 3) and forty (40) parents with children in the Foundation Phase. Twenty (20) ECD teachers, thirty (30) principals and hundred and fifty (150) Foundation Phase teachers participated in the study.

### **2.1. Instruments**

The instruments used in this study were both face to face interviews and a 14-item structured questionnaire. On the questionnaire, items one to twelve sought for the opinion of listening, speaking, writing and reading. It also looks at the issues of policy on mother tongue education in South African Foundation Phase Schools. Then, item thirteen and fourteen sought responses on the benefits of teaching and learning in mother tongue. The questionnaires were intended for the Grade 1 – 3 educators, primary school principals, EDC teachers. The interviews were conducted in African language since most of respondents were not proficient in English. The interviews allocated for parents were having closed and open-ended questions for a follow up inquiry from the researcher. The first question directed to them was basically on the awareness about the contents of the language policy on mother tongue education. And lastly on which language do they wish their children to be taught in. The Grade 1-3 learners had a well-structured interview to answer the question as to in which language would they prefer to be taught in. Since children were not able to answer the questionnaire, it was appropriate to use interviews for that purpose.

### **2.2. Procedure**

The Free State Provincial Education Department in Motheo District directorate was consulted in terms of permission to conduct the study since this study involves participation of minor children. Letter of informed consent was also distributed to their parents to seek authorisation to interview their children. Educators played an important role in identifying learners to be interviewed. The parents interviewed were those who have children attending the same school.

Since this study involves participation of minor children, permission to conduct the study was sought from the Free State Provincial Education Department in the Motheo District directorate. Questionnaires were administered to school principals, ECDs and Foundation Phase teachers of 30 primary schools.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

From the collected data, results show that from the language skills they were asked to answer, they prefer to write in English (i.e. 50% likes to write English, 40% in Sesotho and 10% in *Setswana*) from the chalkboard. They like to read English words (i.e. 40% in English, 30% in *Sesotho* and 30% in *Setswana*). But they like to communicate in *Sesotho/Setswana* because these languages are spoken at home. In most cases, 33% prefer to speak English, 50% speaks Sesotho and 16% speak *Setswana*. When coming to listening, they enjoy listening to their African languages (i.e. 50% in *Sesotho*, 33% in *Setswana* and 17% in English). Regardless of the data collected, learners still maintain that English is the preferred language of learning. On the other side parents maintain that their children should be taught in English (76% believe that English will prepare the future of their children at an early stage. Only 24% of parents showed appreciation of mother tongue education and feels strongly positive about it.

This study aimed at investigating perceptions of learners in Grade 1 – 3 in Foundation Phase education in Motheo district, Free State province in South Africa. The investigation was done on the basis of their choice between mother tongue and English. Their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills were assessed. The overall results showed that learners are in favour of English as a language of instruction. It became apparent that learners, even though they are in favour of English, were unable to communicate in English. They would prefer to communicate with their friends using their mother tongue. This was not surprising because they could naturally freely express themselves with their own indigenous language. The explanation for this might be the parental influence that English is associated with success and intelligence (Mofokeng, 2013; Khejeri, 2014). The negative attitude displayed by parents in relation to the use of home language, has a direct influence on their children's' attitude in learning with their mother tongue (Rahman & Asmari, 2014). Educators' attitude towards the use of mother tongue can be associated with learner attitudes. According to Khejeri (2014) 'mother tongue is disregarded for its lack of instrumental motivations while English is preferred for both its instrumental and integrative motivations' (p.81). At some point educators will undermine learners' home language and show some preferences in the use of English as a language of instruction. This inculcated a negative attitude towards their mother tongue (Khejeri, 2014; Tupas, 2015). The view of this was that if educators are not positive on the use of home language and they prefer English; it is highly possible that this will influence learners to disregard their mother tongue.

On the other hand, parents seem to lack knowledge about the policy of mother tongue education. That is to say, the process of language acquisition required the learner's active involvement. Meaning that for a child to be able to do well in learning the second language, he/she must first master and have a good command of his/her home language (Bhoi, 2014; Ganuza & Hedman, 2015). This in turn will promote bilingualism and multilingualism. The functional use of English is positively instilled in the mind of the learner for future use at an early stage without first taking the degree of language development into cognisance. This view is expressed by one of the participants in an interview.

*"Ha a ka pasa Sesotho, ha se na ho mo thusa ho fumana mosebetsi. Ngwana e nwa ha a na ho kena Yunivesithing ho ya ka molao a sa pasa English. Ke dumela hore ngwana wa ka a kgothalletswe ho ithuta English."* (If he/she passes Sesotho, it will not help him/her get a job. The child will not be admitted if he/she does not pass English. I believe that my child should be encouraged to learn English).

Another respondent put it thus, *"Ngwana o tla tswela pele a sa tsebe letho. Qetellong batla be ba sentse bokamoso ba ngwana ka ho phethahala."* (The child will proceed without knowing anything. Therefore his/her future will be futile.).

In this case, English is regarded as a future determiner. The main concern from the parents' response is employment and success. Parents negatively assess African languages because they are not highly rated (Robinson, 1996; Hart, 2008; Bachore, 2014). Another reason for positively rating English by parents was that African languages have been lowly rated by colonisers' policies before. So, there is no way that they can be revived to occupy top positions. They were also not classified as official language. Another issue was that National Certificate conditions in which were to be fulfilled, required that a learner should pass English in order to obtain Senior Certificate (i.e. Matric). In this case one of the respondents had to say this in the use of Sesotho/Setswana as language of learning in Foundation Phase, *"Ke re jwalo hobane ke tshimollo e mpe eo. Ha bana ba fihla ditlhabong tsa metriki ho tla be ho le thata ho bona, ho tla etsa hore ba pase dithuto tse ding empa e seng puo ya English."* (I say so because it will be difficult to pass English during matric examinations, but other subjects will be easy because they were long introduced to study them in English).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Bilingual education will continue to raise the most controversial and intriguing questions, therefore continuing to be a debatable topic among people involved with education. The suggestion we get from the findings is that parents and children had a more positive attitude towards English than the mother tongue as language of instruction at the Foundation Phase. This shows that people have been so linguistically colonized that they have more trust in the second language than they do in the first language process of children's learning. In short, participants in this study are in favour of English as language of learning because it is a key to success and employment. The attitude towards mother tongue learning is therefore negative.

#### **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study recommends that policy makers should open a platform for a debate on mother tongue teaching so that other stakeholders can be aware about the importance of home language at early years of schooling. Parents should be sensitised on the importance of bilingualism and multilingualism in a given society. Parents and teachers need to be exposed to information concerning the value of using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction as these participants were unaware of the educational benefits of using the first language during the initial years of a child's schooling. Language organisations must try to come up with awareness campaigns on the importance of home language teaching.

We need to change parents and learners' attitudes for favouring English more than the first language. This should be done through campaigns to educate people on the rationale behind the use first language at Foundation Phase. This would assist in creating "a new generation of South Africans who are proud of their languages and their values, their cultures and their heritage" (Pan South African Language Board {PANSALB}, 2011). Currently PANSALB is making great strides to promote indigenous languages standards through sub-projects which involve making monolingual mother tongue dictionaries.

There is a need for further research on how to strengthen current policy implementation measures governing mother tongue in the Foundation Phase education in South Africa. There is a solution, even though 23 years after freedom, parents, teachers and learners still have negative attitudes towards learning in first language, despite benefits offered by mother tongue instruction.

Lastly, research is necessary concerning on how South Africa as a nation can take advantage of "additive bilingualism" rather than viewing as a "subtractive bilingualism" which undermines learning at the first language level. Hence, the scope of this study should also extend to how skills can be enhanced between the first language and the second language level, considering that some studies show how that the transfer is not automatic (Ndamba, 2008; Phindane, 2015).

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