Chapter 17

The language policy and inequalities in institutions of higher learning in South Africa

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Introduction

Education plays a central role in empowering human life. It makes a person rational, intellectual and capable of bringing change to society which contributes towards social-economic reforms in the state. Substantially, language and education are the strongest matrix in societal spaces, where language works as a medium of instruction and expression. Apart from its communicative aspect, education functions as a crucial driver to acquire knowledge. Language, however, is not merely a means of communication but also acts as a vehicle of power, prestige and privilege, which is subsequently utilised to secure better opportunities in public and private spheres. The medium of instruction in educational institutions in South Africa indirectly favours the socially, politically and economically affluent classes. Due to complex structures of hierarchy and discrimination, the education sector in South Africa is not a level playing field, which creates obstacles for the poor, particularly for students from black communities and the rural background as they lack resources and proper academic training in English (Mayaba et al., 2018, 2).

South African society linguistically and culturally remains diverse in nature. The country has numerous spoken and written languages; among them only 11 languages are recognised as official languages along with English and Afrikaans. But in government offices, professional and commercial places, and in the educational institutions of this country, English and Afrikaans enjoy prominence and dominance over the other indigenous languages. The other nine constitutionally recognised languages are not given equal status in practice as is English and Afrikaans. Language and knowledge are inextricably related to each other. Languages have their own roots, a cultural ethos behind them. English domination in educational institutions creates barriers for black people to acquire quality education and knowledge. This, later on, creates and perpetuates a power hierarchy in academic spaces, which makes the teaching–learning space exclusionary and unjust. It is considered that English language has an advantage in providing a better social and economic life; however, students from the black community are unable to avail themselves of these opportunities as they have limited access to English medium schools. This has an overall and lasting impact on their personality development, which deeply affects them psychologically and emotionally, more so resulting in a

lack of self-confidence, anxiety, depression and isolation. Therefore, this chapter seeks to address the language hierarchy persisting in higher educational institutions in South Africa and in their educational policies.

Language policy and politics of education

The chief aim of education is to allow human beings to live a disciplined and fulfilling life. It could be informal or formal education. Moreover, in the process of education, language plays a vital role as a medium and instrument through which knowledge is developed, stored, disseminated and acquired. Cultural value is an inalienable property of language. It is a major force in the preservation process of traditional knowledge from one generation to another. Similar to Indian society, language is also interlinked with race, gender and class in South African society. Black people in South Africa use their native tongue as their first language for learning, communication and knowledge sharing; they find it more comfortable to receive education in their native language. English was a dominant language before the apartheid period; subsequently it was legitimised in the period of apartheid (1948–1994) when the National Party rose to power and adopted a segregationist policy against black people.

In the post-apartheid period, nine other indigenous languages were added in the constitution along with English and Afrikaans. However, discrimination on the basis of language in various academic, professional and social spaces continues to persist in South Africa. Theoretically, the education system has become more equitable in nature, but practically it remains harsh, uneven and discriminatory for speakers of native African languages. Predominantly, academic spaces are totally dominated by English and it is a serious concern for black African students as stated in the following lines: 'the mastery of English remains a precondition for professional employment, political participation and access to higher education' (Parmegiani, 2016, 43). According to article 2 of section 29 of the Constitution of South Africa:

> everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account (a) equity, (b) practicability and (c) the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.
>
> (President Office and Government of South Africa, 1996)

In academia, the domination of English leads to the marginalisation of vernacular medium students inside and outside the classroom. Although they possess an equal rational faculty and wealth, due to conscious behavioural patterns of the 'elite' English medium groups, vernacular medium students feel like outsiders in almost

all contexts. They remain submissive, excluded from supposedly democratic societal spaces.

The elitist status of English in South African institutions creates another language-driven barrier for the overall economic and social development of the country, as quality education becomes a sheer mirage for the masses who are excluded from the system. Professional courses such as medical science and engineering are available exclusively in English. The judicial institutions also function only in the English medium. In a linguistically and culturally diverse country such as South Africa where English is known and spoken by a small minority, the majority of social communication occurs in regional languages native to people. This English advocacy is not just an issue of diversity, it is also about the hegemony of an English-speaking group over the vast majority of students who are from the black community and rural backgrounds. English domination has re-created segregated spaces, as people from privileged backgrounds enjoy elite educational spaces while the rest are left to fend for themselves. Language in education policy 'affects curricula, classroom practices, institutional restructuring, subject choices in South African schools, and the rights of South African parents and students' (Mda, 1997, 366). The mother tongue is the most important language for children as they grow up. English language leads to a learning problem in students because their native language and their language of instruction are not the same. The medium of instruction also plays a major role in a student's life in the form of making various relationships such as in peer groups, friendships, personal relationships and thus relationships inside and outside the classroom. An interactive relationship with the teacher is a major component in the learning sphere, which generates confidence in students during the learning process. In learning and working spaces, vernacular language students are disregarded and downgraded and seen as ignorant and unknowledgeable. But it is a fact that through indigenous language, traditional knowledge can be shared among indigenous people. The mother tongue is connected with human psychology and helps human beings to understand social, political and economic affairs adequately. The hegemony of English over the native languages of South Africa – such as Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho – has caused the extinction of these languages. It reflects that a country cannot set aside the transformative power of diverse languages that are an excellent tool for the transaction of ideas and emotions. Vernacular languages are treated as the languages of suppressed and oppressed sections of society. Students from remote, rural and semi-urban regions cannot find the required texts and reading materials in their own native language, which deprives them of access to original ideas and thoughts. English, uncontestably, is recognised as a prestigious and powerful medium of instruction. Therefore, it reflects the fact that 'it guarantees bread and butter, provides a sense of superiority in society and allows people to enter the circles of power' (Kinzer, 2018).

Such accounts showcase how language becomes a primary tool of discrimination in education, particularly in higher education. Language discrimination in the workplace, university, even in policy formation by the government justifies and legitimises the need for a uniform language in a large part of the world and, thus,

English has become the language of public and private institutions. If one is not able to understand and make sense of the dominant language then one is declared an outsider. Linguistic discrimination derives its legitimacy from social capital cashed through a particular language.

Medium of instruction in South African higher education

The question of language discrimination is not only restricted to South Africa but is acutely prevalent in India also. The domination of English as a medium of instruction excludes marginalised sections of South African and Indian society, who are non-speakers of it. As Mda, (1997) argues, resistance to the official use of African languages as languages of instruction has surfaced among South Africa's African majority, many of whom contend that their children should be exposed to and immersed in English, which is rapidly becoming the language of commerce and politics in South Africa, as early as possible.

Notably, in South Africa, English and Afrikaans dominates, because of 'apartheid'. This can be verified by the number of scholars both languages have in higher educational institutions. 'Each racial group had to have its own territorial area within which to develop its unique cultural personality' (Hazeltine, 2013, 26). The phenomenon of culture is closely associated with language and language speakers. Language discrimination often combines with racism, class and cultural differences to further marginalise disadvantaged communities. During the apartheid period, English – the language of power – was dominant in South Africa. Though nine other indigenous languages have been added by the South African constitution as official languages, it is still difficult for these languages to attain legitimacy and equality similar to the other two dominant languages. Race and language are closely aligned with each other in South Africa. Most white people use and speak English and black people are mostly indigenous language speakers; this disparity proves the hegemony of the English language. South African students face the same problem as Indian students face, which is interlinked with the social and political background of South African and Indian students, such as race in South Africa and caste in India. According to Webb (2006), the domination of English in academia, strengthened by its social, economic and political power and its consequent dominance in public life, trade and industry in South Africa, has become hegemonic … the current situation of disadvantaging, marginalisation, inequality and poverty will be maintained.

The hegemony of one language creates a barrier for speakers of other languages to acquire and gain knowledge in the higher education system. Webb also argued that 'the hegemony of English and the non-development of LOTE (Languages Other Than English) will, ultimately, be threatening to an important component of the country's pluralism, its linguistic diversity, which is said to be regarded as a national treasure' (ibid.). Multilingual countries like India and South Africa are faced with the domination of one language in all prestigious and elite institutions. In a similar vein, John Orman argues that 'English monolingualism is neither srealistic nor an attractive option for a country such as South Africa, if one has

aspirations for the realisation of societal development and socio-economic equality' (Orman, 2009, 166). He further explains that 'a monolingual approach must therefore be rejected on both ideological and practical grounds' (ibid.).

Multilingualism is a main component which connects culture with identity. It is a major tool for establishing a new kind of identity. According to Murray (2002), education is an important means through which South Africa's multilingualism can be both validated and developed Sarah Murray argued that 'during the colonial and apartheid periods, language was a defining characteristic of ethnicity and – partly through the process of standardisation of African languages – was used to set the boundaries of ethnic identity' (ibid., 435).

Equally, Webb (2006) highlighted that a racial and ethnically segregated education system was central to the maintenance of these boundaries; adding that education departments were further divided along linguistic lines, each with its own Afrikaans- and English-medium schools and some that were dual or parallel mediums.

Every individual should have the right to receive education in the language of their choice. If a state fails in this duty it violates the 'linguistic right' of individuals. The interim constitution of South Africa has given its people the right to a basic education in the language of their choice. The Department of Education had itself produced a discussion document in 1995, in which it had proposed 'a multilingual policy' in which 'no language should be introduced at the expense of another'. However, in 1997, the Minister of Education announced a 'new language policy in general and further education' with a more pragmatic approach (ibid., 437).

Language and social mobility

Education is an umbrella term that covers many theories and assumptions of learning and retaining information. It explains the purpose of learning, interpretation and application. It transforms human beings so as to live a sustainable life and ameliorates every individual in the society and community to show the best of their mind and spirit. Education also empowers individuals through knowledge. It brings awareness, a sense of fulfilment and ethical behaviour to enable sustainable growth at a personal and a societal level. It also helps in uplifting and strengthening people psychologically and economically. Students from a vernacular medium are compelled to learn the English language without much government support as they have to compete in the academic and in the administrative spheres where English is dominant.

Language proficiency and accent are also a serious apprehension in classrooms. The classroom environment demotivates non-English speaking students to participate in classroom activities. They are hesitant in raising questions and are less likely to engage in debates and discussions. In this context one student stated that:

> I think that English is for the White people … Sometimes you will find that the lecturer will say a joke in English then the whole class will laugh and you will not laugh just because you did not hear anything. If it was for me, I would

> study everything is in isiZulu; maybe it would be so much better for me to understand because sometimes I do not understand. The problem is not with the subjects but it's the language.
>
> (Parkinson & Crouch, 2011, 94)

Socio-linguistically, this can be defined as 'this shift as accommodation to the language of the environment' (Pavlenko, 2014, 208). The language of the environment is also the language of knowledge and prestige.

Language discrimination affects students' academic performance in many ways, such as scoring less marks, losing academic confidence, lack of job opportunity and drawbacks in conducting research:

> English is not my language … but I speak English because I am forced to speak it … because even I speak it … I do not speak it in such a way that I own it … You see … if I speak isiZulu you can hear that I own it … I … no one can tell me anything about isiZulu because it is mine and I own it.
>
> (Parkinson & Crouch, 2011, 94)

The phrase 'forced to speak' reflects the fact that it affects their academic achievement. As Paulo Freire mentioned, education is a key instrument to enacting social justice; education provides avenues for students to achieve freedom, both intellectual and physical – the 'indispensable condition for the quest for human completion' (Tapper, 2013, 413). But the contemporary education system has not been able to ensure and promote social justice.

Teachers play a significant role in education institutions. They have control over the curriculum and classroom. They are the primary source of providing knowledge in the classroom and have a huge command over the psychology of students. Their degree of academic engagement with students determines their emotional and psychological wellbeing and personality development. The academic and social identity of a teacher and a student is also a major factor in classroom interaction:

> Sometimes when I raise my hand to ask a question from my teacher, they do not respond and sometimes they even say that students from Hindi medium don't do hard work. However, Hindi medium students are more diligent to attend the class than the English medium students. The material provided by the teacher, is in English language, therefore it takes time for Hindi medium students to read, understand and translate them if require to attempt exam in English.
>
> (Student interview excerpt, February 2018)

Language discrimination is less theorised and debated when compared with other forms of discrimination than is faced by students in educational institutions:

> For, as language is the premier tool for self-expression, communication, and learning, it can be a target for prejudice and discrimination. In this context

> where aspects of language use, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, and handwriting, are carefully regulated, schools are often sites of language discrimination against children.
>
> (Murillo & Smith, 2011, 147)

Another student observed:

> Yes, I have faced language discrimination in the classroom which has affected my emotional, psychological and intellectual behaviour negatively. Because I belong to vernacular medium community, I feel uncomfortable when my academic levels are compared to English medium students in the classroom.
>
> (Student interview excerpt, February 2018)

Moghani (1997) held that South African parents prefer to provide education in English thereby stigmatising their own language. They regard it as a privilege to send their children to English medium schools because they think that better education can be achieved only through learning in such schools. However, social equality and political control can, therefore, be gained and exercised only through an effective language. Both in speech and writing, the language can persuade people to live harmoniously and lead a disciplined life.

According to Freire 'an ideal educational experience exists between a teacher and student rather than emanating from a teacher to students. A teacher needs to create experiences with, and not for, students, integrating their experiences and voices into the educational experience itself' (Tapper, 2013, 414). Therefore, the teacher–student relationship is very important. This study observed that university spaces and classrooms are dominated by English medium students. The majority of them do not vehemently oppose English language in the classroom but are simultaneously demanding a respective inclusion in these spaces.

Lessons for institutions of higher education in South Africa and India

Since apartheid, language issues have become worse in higher education in South Africa. Though the constitution of South Africa has given the right to have education in one's own choice of language, in practice it is not implemented due to a hierarchical system. It is urgently required that the government of South Africa should take decisive policy steps, mainly considering the implementation of a three-language policy as a legitimate beginning point towards the elimination of linguistic discrimination and to provide an equal platform to all language speakers.

A multilingual and democratic country such as South Africa should promote its native languages for learning and teaching citizens. If educational institutions deny students their fundamental right, then that would be unconstitutional and

undemocratic. Apart from this, the concept of modernity is used as a tool for the oppression of indigenous people. The current language policy carries the legacy of the colonisers. In this context Mignolo (2007) argued that 'modernity is the logic of oppression and exploitation that manifests itself in dehumanising practices, science, knowledge, and art. It is a "western epistemic trap"' (Mayaba et al., 2018, 6). During colonial times, English created a hierarchy where it was at the top of the knowledge-power pyramid. Prah (1994) underscored this view arguing that the object was to create an African who with understanding of European languages would serve the intentions of colonial power and administration. African education created an elite which distanced itself from the usage of native language.

Government must officially declare vernacular African languages as academic languages, not only merely as languages of cultural identity. Colonisers have occupied the psychology of colonised people and, during the apartheid period, they dominated them through the power of English. This legacy continues in South African educational institutions. Black students of this country have internalised the discourse of the colonisers and accepted English as a superior language. In the context of social justice, government should democratise learning and education. The observations and findings in this study makes it clear that primary level institutions and government policy should have concern for regional languages.

Government should implement three language formulae in tertiary level education, both in South Africa and Indian higher educational institutions. The government should make language policies which provide equal opportunities and access to education so that marginalised sections of society are benefited. Also, universities should establish a language lab in all central, state universities and professional institutions, where students can learn different languages. The text books, journals and e-resources should be made available in various regional languages. The lectures should be conducted in bilingual mode in the classroom and teacher's behaviour towards the regional medium students should be positive, encouraging and cordial. Teachers should create an enabling environment for students both inside and outside the classrooms to enhance the productivity and confidence of students. An anti-language discrimination cell has to be instituted in order to deal with issues related to language discrimination in educational institutions.

Conclusion

A society is judged on the level and quality of its education. This study specifically deals with the relationship between the 'values of language' and the 'higher education system' in the context of South African universities. In other words, this study has examined the domination of English language in higher educational institutions and its consequences on the lives of non-English medium students. The domination of English language in university spaces leads to discriminatory behaviour

towards regional or indigenous language medium students both in South Africa and India.

Language works as a medium between knowledge and power, through which truth is established. It contemplates that truth is actually the truth established by the knowledgeable and authorised person, which is what is accepted widely in society. Therefore, the role of a quality education is to train humans to think critically, logically, rationally and evaluate all matters in an organised way. The role of language, henceforth, becomes central to establish knowledge through which the authenticity of truth can be coherently verified. Education becomes a source of knowledge and, in turn, the same knowledge becomes a currency of power. Through the power of knowledge, a hierarchy has been maintained in society by the elites monopolising knowledge. Therefore, it is important for higher educational institutions to be reformed through an inclusive language policy wherein the medium of instruction is structured in a way that it reflects linguistic and cultural diversity and makes the education system comprehensible to the vernacular language speakers. Access to education to the majority of people will foster the rise of a just and sustainable education system and society.

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