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Switch from Mother Tongue to English: A Double Jeopardy

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the sorry state of switching from mother tongue instruction to English medium of instruction in South Africa. Adopting a critical approach to literature review, it critiques the resistance mounted on the utility of African languages as viable media of instruction. It argues that the status quo is perpetuated by the dominance of English as a medium of instruction both in South Africa and abroad, and that this state of affairs can be traced back to a colonial system which presently works itself out as globalisation and internationalisation. The paper ends by demonstrating how switching from mother tongue instruction to English medium of instruction robs learners and teachers of their intellectual capacity, where they appear incompetent due to a language barrier. The paper concludes that the situation could only be rescued by promoting mother tongue instruction for the majority of South Africans which at the moment is enjoyed by a minority.

Keywords

Mother tongue instruction, English medium of instruction, linguistic challenges, multilingualism, language competence

1. Introduction

During the apartheid era in South Africa, there were only two official languages which were English and Afrikaans. This was obviously a disadvantage to many Africans. When the democratic government took over in 1994, the South African constitution declared eleven languages official. This was done in an attempt to encourage multilingualism in South Africa. It was also done to boost pride in the indigenous languages because they were neglected during the apartheid government. All provinces in the country were required to have provincial language policies that would promote the aspirations of the constitution. Similarly, the Language in Education Policy for schools, guided by principles derived from the constitution of the Republic of South Africa and South African Schools Act, promotes multilingualism. Multilingualism, among other things, was used to prioritise the importance of African languages in schools, to promote both the use of home language in schools and to ensure that learners

acquire another language of communication to encourage respect for other languages. Currently, the Department of Education stipulates that learners should be taught in their mother tongue from Grade one to three (foundation phase), but from Grade four onwards, English is used as a medium of instruction. This stipulation cripples African learners who must abandon their mother tongues which they had used and switch to English (in the majority of cases in KwaZulu-Natal). The English and Afrikaans learners are immediately placed at an advantage because for them, such a switch does not exist and they proceed in their mother tongue. Again, the majority of African learners who attend government schools are double disadvantaged in that those who attend former Model “C” schools do not experience the switch. What exacerbates this disadvantage is that the English they switch to is inferior to the English in former Model “C” schools. This does not only imply educational inequality which is the scourge inherited from the infamous apartheid regime, but also linguistic illiteracy where different forms of English language are at play.

This study therefore investigates the challenges of switching from mother tongue instruction to English medium of instruction by problematising the disparities between English Additional language and English Home language which highlight the double-jeopardy. The study is a literature review that adopts a critical approach. The arguments therefore are framed within the broad spectrum of critical pedagogy. The study first plots the linguistic landscape that informs the South African multilingual reality by critiquing the dominance of colonial languages in the South African language system. It proceeds to interrogate the mother tongue medium of instruction by highlighting the lethargy of promoting African languages into viable media of instruction. The next discussion looks into English medium of instruction by highlighting the challenges this poses not only in South Africa but in other overseas contexts as well. The final discussion underscores the challenges entailed in switching from mother tongue instruction to English medium of instruction in South African primary schools. It is now fitting to first outline the South African linguistic landscape.

2. South African Linguistic Landscape

Before 1994, the bilingual language policy recognised only English and Afrikaans as official languages. The drive to elevate Afrikaans as sole medium of instruction among Black South Africans led to the 1976 Soweto uprisings. Interestingly, the majority of Black South Africans seem to have preferred English over Afrikaans as a medium of instruction (Ntombela, 2016; Probyn, 2005).

The dawn of democracy introduced multilingualism where the former marginalised African languages were given equal official status. This means, in addition to English and Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Setswana, Sesotho, Sepedi, and isiNdebele were elevated to official status. The expectation should have been that the African languages would gain the same level of facility as English and Afrikaans. This is encapsulated in one of the Language-in-Education Policy (Department of National Education, 1997) aims, which is “to promote and develop all the official languages”. Unfortunately, that expectation has remained a mirage. Furthermore, the

Language-in-Education Policy (ibid, 1997) remains unwavering in the underpinnings of additive multilingualism as means to support “general conceptual growth among learners.” This links to another aim which seeks to counter disadvantages resulting from mismatches between home languages and languages of teaching and learning. This mismatch and disadvantage is inherited from the colonial past which also explains another Language-in-Education Policy aim meant “to develop programmes for the redress of previously disadvantaged languages”.

Although the aspirations of the Language-in-Education Policy are noble, it falls short of an implementation strategy (Probyn, 2005). The onus left to the School Governing Bodies (SGBs), parents and learners to choose the language they wish to use as a medium of instruction is misguided and irresponsible. Research (Probyn, 2005) has shown that most SGBs, parents and learners do not have the capacity to make that choice in the majority of the schools. It is like throwing them into a deep end and expect them to swim without the necessary swimming skills. The result is the maintenance of the status quo. The beneficiaries of the status quo use this situation to argue that just like in colonial times; parents have opted for English medium of instruction instead of their indigenous languages.

Whereas English and Afrikaans could be effectively utilised as media of instruction from the first day of school to doctoral level at university, African languages can only enjoy this utility and status up to Grade 3 (Department of Basic Education, 2012). There is no sound pedagogic explanation why learners should not be schooled in their home language throughout their schooling and education life. The only explanation might lie in coloniality. Whilst colonial instruments were multi-pronged, language remains the undying colonial instrument through which the colonisers’ umbilical cord remains intact. Through colonial languages, learners are perpetually kept subservient to a system alien to their context. It almost sounds like commonsense expectation that all former colonised subjects must at a particular stage in their educational life switch to the language of the coloniser.

The point made here is not to suggest erasure of colonial languages from the linguistic map of the colonised – for they are part and parcel of the history of the colonised – but to interrogate the colonial lineage of these languages at the expense of intellectual advancement of the local languages. The colonial languages would still be part of the linguistic repertoire as language subjects, but mother tongues should be utilised as media of instruction if balance and redress envisaged in the Language-in-Education Policy is to be accomplished.

The lethargy of promoting African languages to the same facility as English and Afrikaans in South Africa can be partly explained by the political leaders who took over the government in 1994 (Probyn, 2005), many of whom had come from exile where they had operated in the medium of English. Among other things, the euphoria of returning the country to international community blinded the need to remain linguistically locally grounded. It is this arrangement that made Chetty and Mwepu (2008) conclude that English remains a “savior” amidst the diverse African languages, implying that African languages speakers were ready to tear each other’s throat at whim. They (ibid) use the example of politicians who address masses in the medium of English in political rallies, arguing that such confirm

the undoubted dominance and positive reception of English in the South African linguistic landscape. Notwithstanding that reality, the dominance of English continues to be associated with imperial expansion (Ntombela, 2018), and Afrikaans sought to use similar techniques of imposition and coercion among Black South Africans. Perhaps due to the explicit brutality of the apartheid regime under the Nationalist Party, unlike English, Afrikaans has always suffered resistance and rejection by the majority of Black South Africans pre- and post-1994 (Ntombela, 2017).

This brief outline of the linguistic landscape now takes us to issues of mother tongue instruction in South Africa.

3. Mother Tongue Instruction in South Africa

The mother tongue is associated with a language one first learnt; the language one identifies with or is identified by others; the language one understands the most, or the language one uses the most (Nqoma, Abongdia, & Foncha, 2017). In that note, it is important to highlight that every language has its mother tongue speakers. In the context of South Africa, this means all eleven official languages have their own mother tongue speakers, i.e., every language is somebody's home language. This is important to highlight because arguments for the use of mother tongue education are more often taken to exclude dominant languages such as English and Afrikaans in South Africa. When UNESCO (2016) argued that the best education is the one carried out in the child's mother tongue, they meant every language, the dominant, the minoritised and the marginalised. Because dominant languages (usually the historically colonial) have for a long time been taken as default languages of education, it is normally taken as if advocating for mother tongue education is meant to erase the dominant languages whilst in actual fact, it is meant to advantage all learners through their respective mother tongues.

Krause (2018) for instance downplays mother tongue education arguing that in the South African context, a mother tongue is a colonial missionary creation which does not help its proponents. There is some truth in Krause's (2018) point as confirmed by Roy-Campbell (2019) that many African languages were created by missionaries who were working in different parts of Africa and recorded different dialects of the same language as if they were separate languages. However, by virtue of being a dominant language speaker, it does not appear to Krause that mother tongue education is inclusive of her language. In fact, she is not alone in that line of thought. She seems to have borrowed from Foley (2015) who similarly uses Prah's assertion about the construction of mother tongues in the African context where missionaries driven by a proselytising agenda, developed African languages but from rural dialects (Brock-Utne, 2005). For Foley (2015) and Krause (2018) as well, these languages fall short and are out of touch with modern scientific languages. Thus, Krause (2018), using her experiences during her Master's and doctoral projects where she reports to have observed mismatches of Xhosa grammar, and admissions by her students and colleagues that they were incompetent in isiXhosa, concludes that it does not seem viable to have children taught in that mother tongue because they still need to be taught mother tongue vocabulary when they get to school. Paradoxically, every

child learns (or must learn) the home language when they enter school. This does not mean they are already proficient in the home language to handle serious academic work in the school. It must be borne in mind that the acquisition of a mother tongue at home is a natural phenomenon common to all *Homo sapiens*, but the learning that takes place at school is a formal system that inducts a learner into a different educational context characterised by such literacies as reading and writing. Reading and writing progress smoothly when built upon the already acquired language than when a learner has to learn afresh a new language, which is the case with most Black South Africans. In addition, progressing from an already acquired language sets the stage for an intellectual engagement such as criticality and creativity. These aspects are halted when learners do not have the necessary linguistic tools to carry them out. This is why learners from many contexts characterised by media of instruction other than the mother tongue are stereotypically labelled as quiet, uncritical and passive (Maalim, 2015; Ntombela, 2017).

Obviously, what Krause (2018) seems to have overlooked is the fact that English and Afrikaans are also mother tongues which only stand to privilege mostly White South Africans and the elite. Furthermore, apart from the observation that Krause's argument is premised on mother tongues as solely consisting of any language other than the colonial languages, seeing mother tongues in this light continues to privilege colonial languages and further downgrade and stall the intellectualisation of African languages. The pedagogical challenges stemming from insufficient educational resources in African languages result in pupils struggling to read in their mother tongues (May 2018), which Krause would take to mean fruitlessness of pursuing mother tongue education. Besides, UNESCO (2016) recommends that a child should at least be taught in the home language for the first six years. It is therefore counterproductive to have only three years allocated to mother tongue instruction and still expect that within those three years, learners would have had a thorough grounding in their mother tongue.

Similarly, Foley's (2015) contentions that the project of African languages used as media of instruction is almost impossible given the political will and financial investment that goes with it seems to be informed by a colonial mindset that only sees viability in the colonial languages. He argues that the ingredients that saw the elevation of Afrikaans to the status it occupies do not exist for African languages. In fact, Foley (2015) does not believe that there is any seriousness in pursuing the agenda of African languages media of instruction – he is downright pessimistic. Akpome (2017) in the same vein reduces calls for African languages media of instruction into a neurosis. Coincidentally, whilst Foley is a Professor of English, Akpome is an English Lecturer and both do not only unconsciously regard themselves as the custodians of the English language, they are beneficiaries whose existence and success are inseparable from English language. Therefore, it is expected that they defend the territory occupied by English language even if it remains a barrier to learners' education. In fact, the usual outcry about the low level of education in South Africa does not leave English out of the equation – low level of education has come to be linked with low English proficiency. Instead of investing in

mother tongue education, scholars like Foley (2015), Akpome (2017) and Krause (2018) would always call for better tuition in English because they probably believe that education without English as a medium of instruction is no education.

Furthermore, Foley (2015) hypocritically states that his arguments do not take any side of either for or against mother tongue education but his insistence on the impossibility of the project and the futility of South African education without English sounds like classic coloniality. He uses the rhetoric of apartheid to suggest that if an African language successfully rises to a level of medium of instruction, students would have to be divided into language groupings. Ironically, students are already grouped into either English or Afrikaans, but to Foley, this does not seem to be reminiscent of apartheid.

Additionally, Foley (2015) concludes his argument by highlighting that at the end of the day, it lies with parents and learners to choose the medium of instruction which according to him is currently English. He does not see that learners and parents do not have a choice – English and Afrikaans remain the only possibility which come from their long history of colonial advantage – it is some kind of inverted imposition.

The resistance to mother tongue education obviously mean that there will be no investment in literacy development of African languages. But because the arguments put forward are that it is only the tuition of English that must be fixed, all resources will be channelled that way. This stands to benefit English and Afrikaans mother tongue speakers because for them, there is no switch from one medium of instruction to the other. This group is already described as the most educationally successful because they receive their education in their mother tongue. It was unfortunate that mother tongue education came to be associated with reducing Africans into hewers of wood and drawers of water in Bantu education (Marshall, 2014; Probyn, 2005); but it is even more tragic that after the fall of Bantu education, the benefits of mother tongue education remain a mirage for Africans. The neo-colonial tendency blinds educational policy makers into not seeing the disjuncture of having only English and Afrikaans mother tongue speakers reap the benefits of not switching to another medium of instruction whilst the mother tongue speakers of nine official languages bear the burden of switching to another medium of instruction.

The practice of switching from mother tongue instruction to another medium of instruction plagues every colony. In Tanzania, after the applause of having Swahili as a medium of instruction throughout the education system, there was a reversal where learners had to switch to English at Grade 5 (Maalim, 2015). This came with all sorts of problems chief among which was the lowering of standards because teachers were incompetent in the English language and therefore could not pass quality content to learners who in turn could not contribute to educational experience meaningfully due to the English language barrier. Uganda also has similar problems (Ssentandam, 2014). In South Africa, the double jeopardy is that Black South Africans who switch to English medium of instruction are given English First Additional Language which is inferior to English Main Language done by English mother tongue speakers (Ntombela, 2016). In that way, they lag behind in perpetuity.

As English has been implied as the dominant medium of instruction in the preceding discussion, it is imperative to now unpack this dominance.

4. English Medium of Instruction

The dominance of English as a medium of instruction stretches from colonial expansion to globalisation or internationalisation. Although the context of this study is South Africa, it is not possible to leave out the global space where English exercises its dominance under the guise of globalisation and internationalisation. Doiz et al. (2011) for instance argue that in Europe, even though there is a drive to cultivate multilingualism, English remains the supreme language of instruction. Even though others want to argue about the shifting trends in language which suggest translanguaging especially in the South African context, it becomes apparent that this trend excludes English which favours monolingualism (Doiz et al., 2011). The spread of English as a medium of instruction globally, and especially in Europe is associated with attracting international students, preparing students for global market and raising the profile of the university (Doiz et al., 2011).

The increase in the demand for English as a medium of instruction brings with it numerous challenges including teachers' linguistic incompetence which has a ripple effect on students' understanding of the content (Doiz et al., 2011). It is no wonder that many educators in South Africa are deemed incompetent to teach in the medium of English which can also partly explain low levels of attainment among learners. There is however more to incompetence than meets the eye. This has to do with two distinctions of English offering in South African education.

All the eleven official languages in South Africa are offered as home languages to their respective mother tongue speakers. There is more time allocated to mother tongue from the early stages of learning (Department of Education, 2011; Ntombela, 2016). This is probably meant to facilitate a good grounding in the home language. The advantageous progression would be utilising the home language as a language of teaching and learning, but that seems to be the case for only English and Afrikaans in South Africa. In addition to home language, learners are exposed to first additional language at Grade 1. The time given for learning the home language is more than the time given for first additional language. Logically, this means it would take longer for a learner to be grounded in the first additional language especially when such a language is mostly accessed within the school premises. If the first additional language was learnt solely for the promotion of multilingualism, the challenges would be less. Unfortunately, this first additional language subsequently becomes the medium of instruction for the majority of Black African students. Only the students who have financial means are afforded the opportunity to use the home language as a medium of instruction, but even in this case, it is either English or Afrikaans (Ntombela, 2016). The rationale of having these different offerings (English Home Language and English First Additional Language) especially when the same language would be used as a medium of instruction is not clear. In that way the majority of Black South African students are double-jeopardised because not only do they forfeit the advantage of learning through their mother

tongue, they switch to first additional language in which they are underprepared and incompetent. Furthermore, the best way of understanding this disparity between first additional language and home language is to use the ESL/EFL context versus English first language context (Ntombela, 2016). ESL (English as a Second Language) differs from EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in that the former presumes a context where the speakers of different languages use English in order to communicate with each other whilst speakers in an EFL context share the same language but need English in order to communicate with native speakers (Ntombela, 2016). Students who have learnt English in either EFL or ESL context are still considered less proficient. For instance, when such students wish to pursue higher education in universities abroad, they are usually required to demonstrate English proficiency through such tests as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) (Ntombela, 2016).

The discussion will now take us to the challenges of switching from mother tongue instruction to English medium of instruction. These challenges are highlighted in the study which was conducted in King Cetshwayo District, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study was conducted by Khumalo (2018) among teachers and Heads of Department (HoDs) in primary schools.

5. Challenges of Switching from Mother Tongue to English Medium of Instruction

There is undoubtedly a myriad of challenges associated with switching from mother tongue instruction to English medium of instruction in Black South African schools. It must be understood that most of these challenges stem from using an additional language in which most learners have had inadequate development. In fact, as Probyn (2005) asserts, the theory of additional languages meant to promote multilingualism by increasing learners' linguistic repertoire, but because in South Africa (and perhaps in many other colonised countries) the additional languages happen to be powerful in many respects, it becomes counter-intuitive to have a different medium of instruction than a former colonial language.

We shall now turn to the research that reports teachers' and Heads of Department's frustrations about the effects of switching from mother tongue medium of instruction to English medium of instruction. The narratives provided by the participants are reported verbatim (they have not been edited). As said, the research was conducted in primary schools in King Cetshwayo District in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Four English language educators and two Mathematics educators were interviewed by Khumalo (2018) through a semi-structured interview. Khumalo (2018) used a focus group to collect data from three Heads of Department in Intermediate phase.

Although the research was conducted by Khumalo (2018) on the influence of standardised testing on teaching and learning focusing on annual national assessment (ANA) in King Cetshwayo District primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa; this study is only interested in narratives that point to the challenges of switching from mother tongue to English medium of instruction. Different Mathematics educators, English educators and Heads of Department highlighted different challenges relating to the use of English as a medium of instruction. For instance one English educator said:

“The challenge is with the learners who have a language barrier because in Grade 6 we are not allowed to read questions for learners and that give some learners a challenge as they cannot read some instructions on their own. Since language used to set papers is English and is difficult for learners since they have started to learn it in Grade 4” (English Educator 1) (Khumalo, 2018, p. 89).

The point made by this educator is that the two years (from Grade 4 to 6) is not sufficient to develop learners to cope with English language. At Grade 6 questions are set in English and teachers are forbidden from explaining exam instructions to learners. Unfortunately, those who disallow teachers from helping learners understand the questions seem to have no idea about linguistic realities in classrooms. This situation is disabling for both teachers and learners. Teachers must helplessly watch learners struggle on their own whilst they know they cannot find their way out of that linguistic barrier. It is clear that those who set policies operate on assumptions and are out of sync with what is happening on the ground.

This situation makes learners appear incompetent especially when judged by their performance in the standardised tests. If they struggle understanding instructions in the exam, their responses are bound to be poor. They would be easily categorised as wanting and their teachers equally incompetent as this English teacher indicates:

“Most ANA question papers are full of language vocabulary which is not in the level of learners. Learners have to read a lot before writing, solving or doing numbers. Some learners cannot read and others are slow in reading this resulted in their poor performance” (English Educator 2) (Khumalo, 2018, p. 89).

In other words, the learners are expected to use skills they have not developed. These standardised tests are set with an ideal learner at an ideal level. As a result, vocabulary is pitched at a level that favours mother tongue speakers who had used English as a medium of instruction from the first day at school. The realities under which the language must develop are not taken into account. It is not realistic that learners would have developed enough language skills to use that language as a medium of instruction within two years especially if the exposure to the target language is largely confined to the classroom. This situation sets learners for failure from the start. They are made to compete with peers who have been using their mother tongue from the beginning and have accumulated adequate vocabulary to operate at that level. When results come, they feed to the false narrative that Black learners have deficient intelligence (Roy-Campbell, 2019).

More than anyone else, it is the educators who understand better; know better, and can better assist learners in their educational challenges. The educators understand that learners’ linguistic command has not risen to the level that they could perform in various subjects. More than any other problem, the learners’ challenge remains a linguistic one and no one can tell us better than the teacher in front of them as this English educator confirms:

“Language used in ANA is the language the learners are not familiar with it, our learners have

problems with language. You have to repeat the question more than once but ANA does not allow that, not giving us an opportunity to guide learners through the questions” (English Educator 3) (Khumalo, 2018, p. 89).

We can feel the educator’s frustration that whilst learners would benefit from further explanations, there is no one to assist. In the teaching context, teachers easily resort to the language that the learners understand better (their mother tongue), but this resort is not available in assessment. Even though learners would grasp concepts with the help of their mother tongue, such gain is lost when it comes to assessment. Those who design assessments seem to regard classroom interaction as completely belonging to a different world where learners are expected to operate monolingually.

The different educators who participated in the study unanimously confirm that the biggest problem for learners’ underachievement is language. These are English language and Mathematics educators as well as the HoDs. Consider for instance the response by this English educator:

“Some ANA questions are not clear, the language they used or wording is not easily understood by the learners in the Grade 6 level” (English Educator 4) (Khumalo, 2018, p. 90).

The truth of the matter, however, might be that the level is pitched at Grade 6, but for a learner who has gone through an English mother tongue instruction from the beginning. Without such advantage, concepts would seem disproportionately pitched. The Mathematics educator puts it this way:

“ANA question papers are full of language; learners have to read a lot before solving or doing numbers. Learners cannot read and others are slow in reading this resulted in their poor performance” (Mathematics Educator 1) (Khumalo, 2018, p. 90).

The Mathematics educators interestingly do not complain about learners’ mathematical problems; they regard learners’ problems to be language oriented. This situation is even dire for learners who come from rural areas where exposure to English language is minimum, i.e., only confined to the classroom, in most cases during the English period. This is reiterated by the following Mathematics educator:

“Sometimes ANA tests concepts that are far beyond what learners are supposed to be taught at that level. It does not allow contextual factors such as language barrier since schools are located in different areas, for example some are in deep rural areas where English is a barrier like in case of in my school” (Mathematics Educator 2) (Khumalo, 2018, p. 90).

The problem with language incompetence affects learners’ thinking skills. In many cases learners are often thought of as lazy to think or unable to think. These standardised tests would be cited as evidence that most Black South African learners are incapable of thinking. As a result, learners suffer double-stupidification in being linguistically and mathematically incompetent. This Head of Department puts it this way:

“Educators are complaining on the language used in ANA papers that is above level of learners’ capabilities and thinking skills. In this manner failure rate becomes high and that makes educators to think that ANA is not a good tool to measure learner performance” (HoD 1) (Khumalo, 2018, p. 91).

Indeed, educators are justified in thinking that such tests as ANA are not accurate tools because such tests assume that learners are at certain level of English language proficiency. It is absurd that learners fail not on account of lack of information but on account of not accessing how the information they have can be expressed as this Head of Department indicates:

“Language barrier makes our learners to fail to understand what is needed from them in the examination. Our learners fail to respond to questions in the examination because they do not know on how to interpret questions” (HoD 2) (Khumalo, 2018, p. 91).

If only the instructions were in the language accessible to learners, this problem of not understanding what to do in the exam would be non-existent. In fact, these standardised tests, as indicated earlier, are seemingly designed with mother tongue speakers in mind. This is evidenced by the fact that even teachers (who are second language speakers) have difficulties in answering the questions set for learners. This Head of Department admitted:

“Before discussion of the memorandum from the circuit my educators answer questions on their own. We found that there were complexities of questions that were difficult to be answered even by the educators. This shows that the language used is above the level of the learners” (HoD 3) (Khumalo, 2018, p. 91).

It is therefore clear that the use of English First Additional Language as a medium of instruction is setting many Black South African learners for failure. The ANA tests inaccurately show underperformance whilst in actual fact; learners have not been adequately prepared owing to switching from mother tongue instruction to English First Additional language medium of instruction. This means learners who have never switched from a mother tongue would always fare better than those who switch, sending a wrong message that these learners have deficient intellect.

The challenges reported in this study are reminiscent of what happens in other areas in South Africa (Probyn, 2005), Tanzania (Brock-Utne, 2005; Maalim, 2015) and Uganda (Ssentanda, 2014) to mention a few. Brock-Utne (2005) for instance iterates the sorry case of Tanzania where both students and teachers suffer because of the lack of competence in English – a problem that could be solved by Swahili medium of instruction. In fact, one English teacher who had taught in Tanzania for 25 years maintains that it makes a lot of sense to leave Swahili as a medium of instruction and then invest on the teaching of English as a subject (ibid). In that way, learners and teachers would be spared the cycle of incompetence in English and content subjects. Sadly, even though the learners are aware of learning difficulties posed by English medium of instruction in Tanzania, they have been indoctrinated by a colonial fallacy that English medium of instruction is a panacea and unless subjects are taught in English, the quality of education hovers under a huge cloud of doubt (ibid). This kind of mindset is not different from that of other places like Peru where the logical promotion of Quechua is met with resistance by Quechua communities despite the pedagogical success “in helping local students learn and value the indigenous language” (Canagarajah, 2005, p. 200).

6. Conclusion

We have seen that South Africa emerged from a multilingual state of denial to the state of multilingual acknowledgement and promotion as encapsulated in the Language-in-Education Policy. However, it is apparent that the promotion of nine of the eleven official languages lags behind. English and Afrikaans on the one hand continue to be used as media of instruction throughout the education system. On the other hand, African languages lack development and are often perceived as incapable of operating as media of instruction at the same level as English and Afrikaans. However, this is only but an excuse which does not have any scientific backing. It is a perception that can be traced back into a colonial system that only privileges colonial languages at the expense of the indigenous ones. In fact, the use of African languages as viable media of instruction is met with resistance by mostly those who are beneficiaries of the English language which include English mother tongue speakers and English academics.

We have also pointed out that the use of English and Afrikaans as the sole media of instruction only benefit their mother tongue users and a few Black African children of the elite who have access to schools where English or Afrikaans is used as a Home language medium of instruction. What further complicates the problem is that when Black Africans switch to English medium of instruction, they switch to English First Additional language in which learners have not received a sufficient grounding. In fact, additional languages were not meant to be media of instruction. It is this arrangement that perpetually sets Black South Africans behind.

Furthermore, overreliance on English as the medium of instruction has become hegemonic. Even when the mother tongue medium of instruction could be used, the perception of the power of English in the global sphere becomes a trap for many educators and learners. It is therefore disturbing that the education system seems to be underpinned by the inevitability of switching from mother tongue instruction to English medium of instruction for the majority of Black African learners. In other words, just as it used to be in the past where the majority of Black South Africans were dependent on the minority White South Africans, the current dependence is through English language.

Switching to English First Additional language as a medium of instruction has many problems. Learners at primary school cannot grasp content as they have not attained the necessary vocabulary. The result is that when standardised tests are conducted, learners (and their teachers) are often labelled as unintelligent because they cannot perform at the same level with their peers. It is therefore clear that the biggest educational problem among Black African learners is language which can be solved by mother tongue instruction.

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