

WHAT IS THE ACTUAL MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN FORMERLY BLACK SECONDARY SCHOOLS? CURRENT PRACTICE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE POLICY FORMULATION

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This article was prompted by the response to the results of an earlier publication (Meyer 1995) which sought to establish actual practice regarding medium of instruction at matric level in formerly DET black secondary schools in what was then the Transvaal. The results of that investigation showed that the actual position regarding medium of instruction, primarily in the Northern Province, was that two-thirds of teachers and students followed a policy of using only English, while most of the remaining one-third pursued a policy of simultaneous use of English and a vernacular language. Fewer than five per cent of teachers and students claimed to use only their first language as medium. This article reports on a series of challenges to the claim that English-only is the predominant medium, suggesting instead that the phenomenon of code-switching or the simultaneous use of two languages is most common. The possible implications for medium of instruction policy formulation and implementation are briefly considered.

Die respons op die resultate van 'n vroëer publikasie (Meyer 1995) het tot hierdie artikel aanleiding gegee. Die vorige artikel het gepoog om vas te stel wat in werklikheid plaasvind ten opsigte van medium van onderrig op matriekvlak in voormalige "DET" swart sekondêre skole in die eertydse Transvaal. Die resultate van daardie ondersoek het getoon dat die werklike toestand ten opsigte van medium van onderrig, veral in die Noordelike Provinsie, was dat twee derdes van die onderwysers en studente 'n beleid gevolg het van alleenlik Engels te gebruik, terwyl die meeste van die oorblywende een derde 'n beleid van die gelyktydige gebruik van Engels en die moedertaal gevolg het. Minder as vyf persent van onderwysers en studente het beweer dat hulle net hulle moedertaal as medium gebruik het. Hierdie artikel berig oor 'n reeks uitdagings wat die bewering bevraagteken dat die alleen gebruik van Engels die oorwegende medium is. Daar word aangevoer dat die verskynsel van kodewisseling of die gelyktydige gebruik van twee tale eerder die algemene gebruik is. Die moontlike implikasies wat dit vir die medium van onderrig-beleidformulering en -implementering inhou word kortliks in oënskou geneem.

INTRODUCTION

In an earlier publication (Meyer 1995), I noted that little of the debate surrounding the choice of medium of instruction in South Africa appears to be based on what is currently happening in schools which cater for the majority of students (who do not speak English or Afrikaans as their first language (L1)). On the basis of arguments put forward by Kennedy (nd), Prabhu (1992), and Luckett (1992), and on the strength of my own experience, I argued that "any future policy on medium of instruction must take account of recent and current practice if new policies are to be

accepted and successfully implemented by teachers and students" (Meyer 1995: 1). Luckett makes the point that the policies of language planners will only be successful if they are "compatible ... with the everyday natural attitudes of ordinary people" (Luckett 1992: 42). It is my contention that those responsible for formulating and implementing language policy will only be successful to the extent that their policies are compatible with the attitudes and skills of the teachers and students who have to live with these policies. As Prabhu has noted, any lesson can be characterised as a stable routine negotiated between the teacher and the students, and therefore any new policy which is not compatible with the attitudes and skills of the teacher and students, and which is therefore unsettling to that routine is "... likely ... either to be discarded as unworkable or to be absorbed into a new stable routine ..." (Prabhu 1992: 225).

In the previous study, I reported on the results of a pilot-survey which sought to answer the question: "What was the medium of instruction practice in formerly Black secondary schools in the former Transvaal province?". That survey found that at matric level the official policy of English as medium was adapted or rejected by about one third of teachers and students in the 872 classrooms surveyed, and that the de facto situation in schools was that three different policies were being followed: English-only, first language only, and a mixture of English and a first language. Responses to that investigation fundamentally challenge some of the results obtained. This article reports on the nature and implications of these challenges.

BACKGROUND

The results of the first investigation were formally presented at the annual Southern African Applied Linguistics Association (SAALA) Conference held at the University of Stellenbosch in July 1995. While no systematic attempt was made to record the response of delegates to the enquiry, the general reaction seriously called into question the pattern of the results, and in particular the finding that English-only was the medium in two-thirds of the 872 matric classrooms surveyed. Delegates with extensive experience in formerly black schools argued that the majority of teachers and students relied mainly on their L1, or on a mixture of English and their L1, as the medium of instruction with regard to spoken language use.

The perception that students and teachers make use of their first language in addition to English is reinforced by a range of sources in the literature. According to the NEPI language report (1992):

... in many schools using a L2 medium of instruction, two languages are used in the classroom both in primary and in high school, and if they were not, pupils' grasp of concepts and of new subject matter would suffer. Teachers often use the mother tongue to explain matters that pupils find inaccessible in the L2. Although the practice of switching languages is an essential feature of many classrooms, it is stigmatized (NEPI language report 1992: 90).

The mixing of English and Zulu is reported by Adendorff (1992), who also draws attention to the stigmatisation of this form of linguistic behaviour:

I am surprised at the responses of Zulu English teachers to my questions about the prevalence of, and purposes behind, code-switching in predominantly Black classrooms, bearing in mind, of course, that English is the language of instruction. They imply that code-switching is an indecent, forbidden form of behaviour. It

seems to me that code-switching is something many teachers are ashamed to admit to (Adendorff 1992: 4).

Wright (1993) draws attention to the extensive use of vernacular languages in former DET schools:

In many supposedly English-medium classrooms in DET schools, there is in fact little sustained English-language discourse. The teacher makes a series of statements in English which is then 'translated' for the benefit of the class. What one hears very often is vernacular discourse interspersed with English phrases and terminology (Wright 1993: 2).

As a result of the responses of delegates at the SAALA conference, and due to the widely reported phenomenon of code-switching and L1 use in the literature, I presented the results of the first enquiry to a postgraduate group of students who were all educated in formerly black schools, and some of whom are now working in schools and colleges of education catering solely for students who are not L1 speakers of English. In contrast to the earlier research, I formally recorded the responses of this group, and, while reporting on these responses in this article, will compare them with those of my first investigation.

AIMS

The aims of the first investigation were twofold:

- * to identify current practices in formerly black schools, mainly in the Northern Province
- * to identify tensions between official policy and classroom practice and to assess the implications of these tensions for language policy.

The aims of this second investigation are the same as those of the first. However, a third aim is to triangulate the results of the first investigation by posing the same questions to a smaller group of informants who could be relied upon to be candid. Ideally, the group in the second sample should have been larger to provide greater reliability. However, given doubts about the candour of many of the responses in the first study, I chose to work with this small intact group where candour would be guaranteed.

SAMPLE

The postgraduate group consisted of seven students who matriculated between 5 and 20 years ago in formerly black schools in the Northern Province, Mpumalanga and the Northwest Province. Four of the students are currently teaching in schools or colleges of education (catering solely for black students whose L1 is not English) while engaged in part-time postgraduate studies. The remaining three students proceeded directly from secondary education through undergraduate to postgraduate studies.

RESULTS

In the first study, six questions were put to the respondents. Each question had two parts, although these were not separated in the formal questionnaire. For example: **1. Which language or languages are used by teachers when speaking to their classes, and if more than one language is used, then in what proportion are these languages used?** In the second study only the first part of each question is asked since the results of the second part of the question were not analysed in detail in the first study. The questions put to both groups, and the answers to each question, are presented and compared below.

1. Which language or languages are used by teachers when speaking to their classes?

The responses to this question are presented in Figures 1a and 1b below.

Figure 1a. First Survey. Teachers to students.

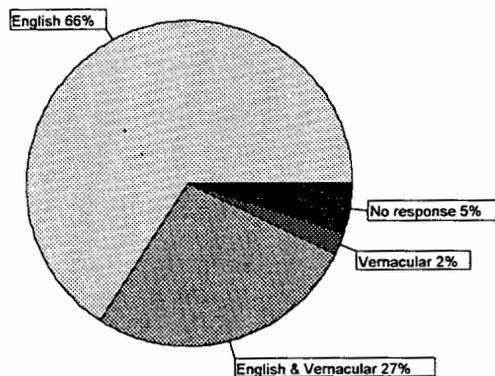
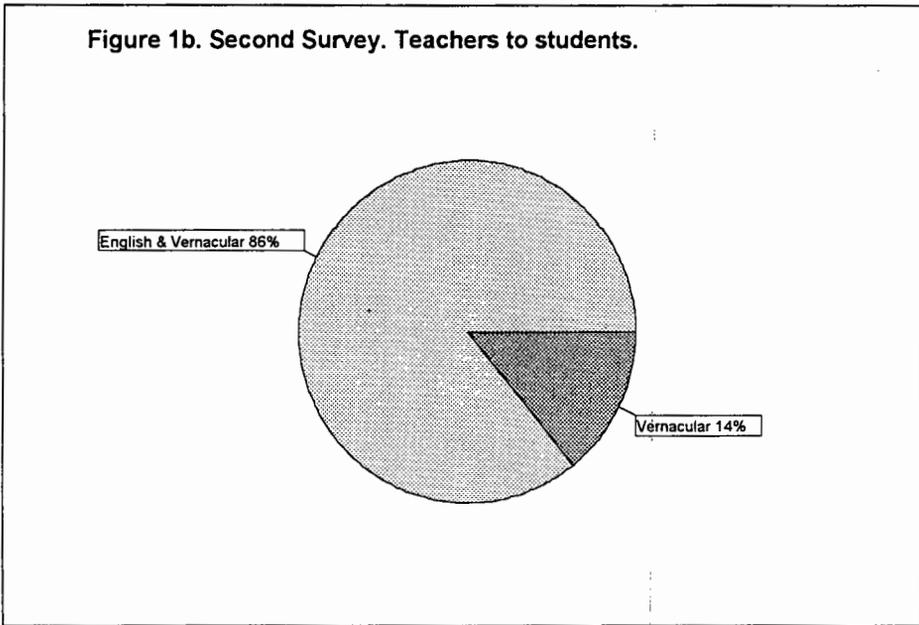


Figure 1b. Second Survey. Teachers to students.



A cross-tabulation of the responses to this question in these two surveys (including the exact numbers of respondents as well as percentages) is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation of results of both surveys : Languages used by teachers to students.

	ENGLISH ONLY	ENGLISH & VERNACULAR	VERNACULAR ONLY	NO RESPONSE	TOTAL RESPONSE
FIRST SURVEY	575 (66%)	240 (27%)	14 (2%)	43 (5%)	872 (100%)
SECOND SURVEY	0 (0%)	6 (86%)	1 (14%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)

With regard to teachers' use of language, the second survey fundamentally challenges the finding in the first survey that two-thirds (66%) of matric teachers use only English, while less than a third (27%) use a mixture of English and a vernacular language. In the second survey, no one claims to use only English. Instead, the majority of respondents indicate that most teachers (86%) employ combination of English and a vernacular language, while the remainder (14%) employ only vernacular language.

2. Which language or languages are used by *students when speaking to their teachers?*

A diagrammatic representation of the answers to this question is presented in Figures 2a and 2b below.

Figure 2a. First Survey. Students to teachers.

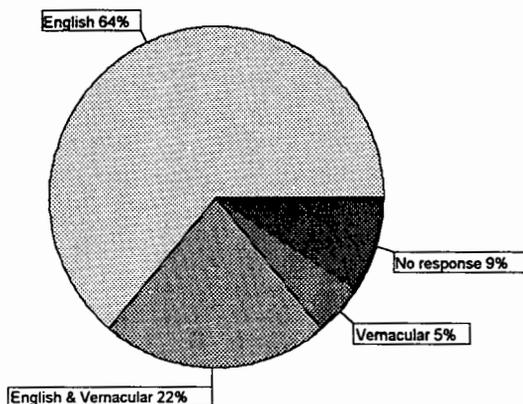
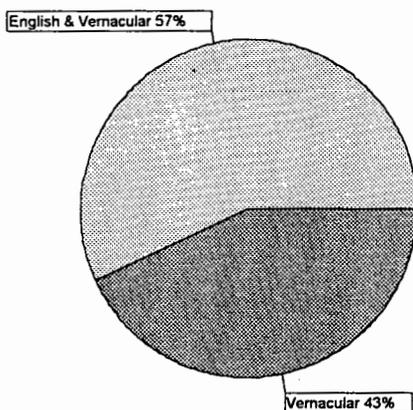


Figure 2b. Second Survey. Students to teachers.



A cross-tabulation of the responses to the above question in the two surveys (including the exact numbers of respondents as well as percentages) is given in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of results : Languages used by students to teachers.

	ENGLISH ONLY	ENGLISH & VERNACULAR	VERNACULAR ONLY	NO RESPONSE	TOTAL RESPONSE
FIRST SURVEY	558 (64%)	192 (22%)	43 (5%)	79 (9%)	872 (100%)
SECOND SURVEY	0 (0%)	4 (57%)	3 (43%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)

Once again a marked difference between the results of the first and second surveys is to be seen with regard to students' use of language when speaking to teachers. The findings of the first survey suggest that two-thirds (64%) of students always speak to their teachers in English, while less than one-third (22%) use a mixture of English and a first language, and a minority (5%) use only their first language. By contrast, the second survey indicates quite the opposite, with no one (0%) claiming to use only English, a small majority (57%) claiming to use a mixture of languages, and the remainder (43%) employing only their first language.

3. Which language or languages are used by students when speaking to other students?

A diagrammatic representation of the responses to this question is presented in Figures 3a and 3b below.

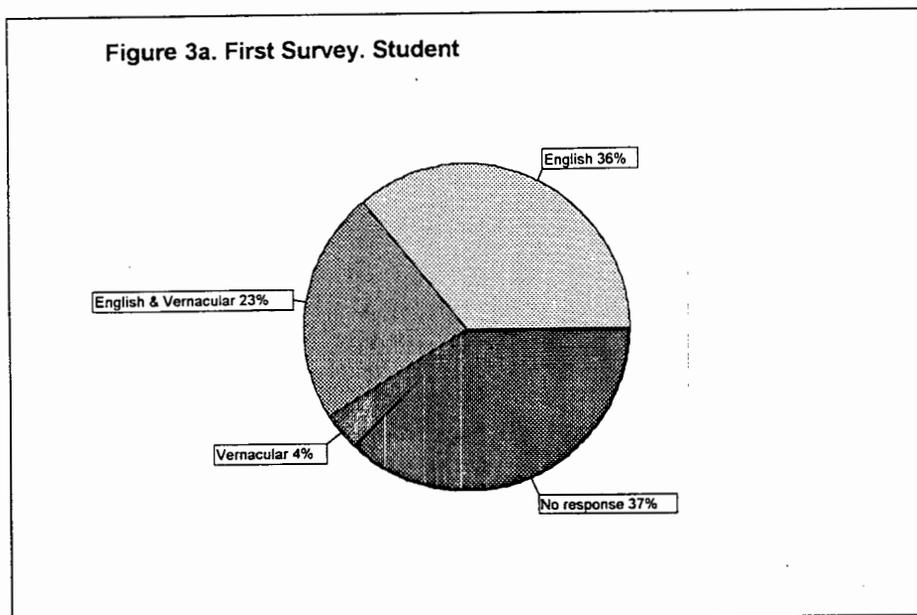
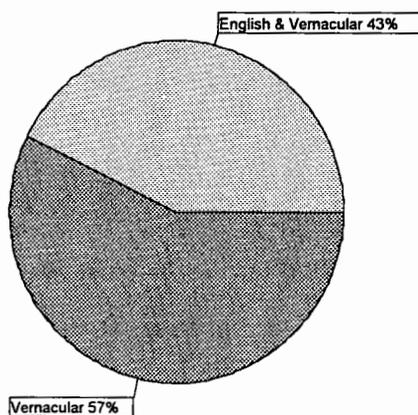


Figure 3b. Second survey. Students to students.



A cross-tabulation of the responses to the above question in the two surveys (including the exact numbers of respondents as well as percentages) is given in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Cross-tabulation of results of both surveys : Languages used by students to students.

	ENGLISH ONLY	ENGLISH & VERNACULAR	VERNACULAR ONLY	NO RESPONSE	TOTAL RESPONSE
FIRST SURVEY	307 (36%)	207 (23%)	36 (4%)	322 (37%)	872 (100%)
SECOND SURVEY	0 (0%)	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)

As regards the third question, students' use of language when speaking to other students in class, the trend is clearly away from the use of English-only (36% in the first survey and 0% in the second survey) towards a predominant use of a vernacular language (57% in the second survey) and a mixture of English and a vernacular language (43% in the second survey).

4. Which language or languages are used by teachers when writing notes on the board?

The responses to this question, which are very similar in both surveys, are cross-tabulated in Table 4 below. In the first survey 95,5 per cent of respondents claim that teachers' notes on the board are always written in English, while only 0,2 per cent claim that the vernacular only, or a combination of English and the vernacular is used. In the second survey, all respondents (100%) noted that English-only is used for teachers' notes on the board.

Table 4. Cross-tabulation of results of both surveys : Teachers' notes on the board.

	ENGLISH ONLY	ENGLISH & VERNACULAR	VERNACULAR ONLY	NO RESPONSE	TOTAL RESPONSE
FIRST SURVEY	833 (95,5%)	1 (0,1%)	1 (0,1%)	37 (4,3%)	872 (100%)
SECOND SURVEY	7 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)

5. Which language or languages are used by students when writing notes in exercise books?

The responses to this question, which are very similar in both surveys, are cross-tabulated in Table 5 below. In the first survey, 94,7 per cent of respondents claim that students use only English when writing notes in their exercise books, students use only English, while a mere 0,8 per cent claim that the vernacular only, or a combination of English and the vernacular is used. In the second survey, all respondents (100%) noted that students use only English in their exercise books.

Table 5. Cross-tabulation of results of both surveys. Students' notes in exercise books.

	ENGLISH ONLY	ENGLISH & VERNACULAR	VERNACULAR ONLY	NO RESPONSE	TOTAL RESPONSE
FIRST SURVEY	826 (94,7%)	3 (0,3%)	4 (0,5%)	39 (4,5%)	872 (100%)
SECOND SURVEY	7 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)

6. Which language or languages are used by students when writing tests?

The responses to this question, which are very similar in both surveys, are cross-tabulated in Table 6 below. In the first survey, 96,3 per cent of respondents claim that when writing tests, students use only English, while 0,4 per cent claim that the vernacular only is used. In the second survey, all respondents (100%) noted that students use only English when writing tests.

Table 6. Cross-tabulation of results of both surveys. Students' writing in tests.

	ENGLISH ONLY	ENGLISH & VERNACULAR	VERNACULAR ONLY	NO RESPONSE	TOTAL RESPONSE
FIRST SURVEY	840 (96,3%)	0 (0%)	3 (0,4%)	29 (3,3%)	872 (100%)
SECOND SURVEY	7 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)

In general, it can be said that, while the results of the second survey seriously challenge the findings of the first with regard to spoken language use, the second survey largely confirms the findings of the first in respect of written language.

DISCUSSION

The responses of the SAALA delegates, the results of the second survey, and the accounts contained in the literature all challenge the results of the first survey with regard to the use of spoken language in matric classrooms. Instead of relying on English alone, the majority of matric teachers and students in the Northern Province appear to employ a mixture of English and their first language as the medium of instruction. While both surveys show that code-switching occurs, they differ on the extent to which code-switching occurs.

In the discussion of the first investigation (Meyer 1995), I noted that in terms of the NEPI medium of instruction options, the results of the first survey showed that the de facto position regarding medium of instruction policy was that three of the six options mentioned by NEPI were being followed. In the first place, a majority of matric teachers (66%) and students (64%), in 1990 and the years immediately preceding it, appeared to adhere to the official policy of using English-only; secondly, about one-third (27% of teachers; 22% of students) appeared to pursue a bilingual policy, and thirdly, a small minority (2% of teachers; 4% of students) followed a policy of mother-tongue instruction.

In terms of the NEPI options, the results of the second survey suggest that two rather than three of the six NEPI options were being followed with respect to spoken language use, and that both of these options constitute either an adaptation or even a rejection of the official policy. Indeed, in stark contrast to the results of the first survey, which indicated that a majority of teachers (66%)

and students (64%) adhered to the official policy, the results of the second survey indicate a total adaptation and/or rejection of the official English-only policy in favour of a bilingual (86% of teachers; 57% of students) or vernacular (14% of teachers; 43% of students) option.

Given the nature of the evidence currently available, no firm generalisations are possible. Instead, what will be put forward here is the following hypothesis concerning medium of instruction in matric classrooms in formerly black schools in the Northern Province (and perhaps Mphumalanga and the Northwest Province). It would appear that the majority of teachers and students, when communicating with each other in their content classes, attempt to adhere to the official policy of English medium, but that where they find it necessary (for reasons to be probed in forthcoming investigations), they employ their vernacular languages. Furthermore, a relatively small number of teachers and a somewhat larger group of students appear to reject the use of English for purposes of spoken interaction in favour of their vernacular languages.

But if the above hypothesis is accurate, why did the majority of students in the first survey report that English-only was the medium? The answer to this question is suggested by Adendorff and the writers of the NEPI report in the quotations above, who point to the stigmatisation of this form of linguistic behaviour.

Unlike the affected students and teachers, the writers of the NEPI language report argue in favour of code-switching:

Although the practice of switching languages is an essential feature of many classrooms, it is stigmatised. We believe that there should be active efforts to counter this stigma, and there is evidence that elsewhere in Africa there are calls for the recognition and endorsement of the use of this strategy (NEPI language report 1992: 90).

Adendorff argues in favour of disabusing teacher trainees of

... deficit notions of codes in general and of code-switching, in particular, for example, that it is dysfunctional, that it is symptomatic of ignorance, that it is the product merely of insufficient "target language" resources, that it is something to be embarrassed about (Adendorff 1992: 18).

The evidence from the three sources mentioned in this paper seems to suggest that, of the six NEPI options, the one practised by most matric teachers and students most closely approximates to "bilingual education throughout schooling", which has evolved in response to the English medium policy. While code-switching may not be acceptable to all, and indeed is often denied by teachers and students themselves, it is hypothesised that this is the actual policy practised by the majority of teachers and students in the Northern Province (and perhaps the Northwest Province and Mphumalanga as well). If the phenomenon of code-switching is as widespread as the evidence presented in this investigation seems to suggest, then those responsible for language policy formulation and implementation would be well advised to consider how best to utilise it in their deliberations. In the meantime, applied linguists, and researchers concerned with medium of instruction can assist with successful policy formulation and implementation by first establishing what is happening in classrooms where English is used as medium by teachers and students for whom it is not a first language.

CONCLUSION

One explanation of why code-switching has evolved to a position where it appears to be practised so widely is that while teachers and students see English as the language of access (reinforced by its long standing official status and educational provision), their proficiency in the language is, in many cases, not adequate to permit their exclusive reliance on it. In other words, while recent policy, access and educational provision encourage the use of English, failure to comprehend subject matter frequently necessitates recourse to the L1. On the other hand, while students and teachers possess proficiency in their L1, the lack of official status for these languages until recently, negative attitudes due to the apartheid legacy, and the lack of development of these languages for educational purposes, have all militated against their use as media of instruction. However, with the change in national language policy and the apparent direction of language policies for schools as recently reported in the press (Mabote 1995: 5), it is possible to speculate that the apparent predominance of code-switching could evolve in one or more of three directions. First, code-switching, or the simultaneous use of two languages could become officially sanctioned and supported. An important outcome of such a policy could be that teachers and students will develop positive attitudes towards, and increased proficiency in, both their L1 and English. Secondly, as teachers' and students' proficiency in English continues to develop, a move away from code-switching towards an exclusive reliance on English may become possible. Finally, if the new eleven official language policy results in the development of the nine previously neglected indigenous languages for literate and educational purposes, the present reliance on code-switching may give way to the use of first languages as media of instruction. In the meantime, while we wait to see what concrete steps are taken to develop the nine new official languages, the practice of code-switching holds out the possibility of medium of instruction policy developing in any one or more of the three directions sketched above.

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