

THE CHALLENGES OF DESIGNING A COMMON, STANDARDS-BASED CURRICULUM FOR ALL SOUTH AFRICA'S LANGUAGES

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This article examines the challenges of designing a common core curriculum for all South Africa's eleven official languages to be taught as school subjects. It takes the position that curriculum design should be responsive to the character and status of specific languages, the purposes for which they are used and the time available in the curriculum to study them. Curriculum developers should also be knowledgeable about the historical antecedents of the language curriculum in question, and familiar with its associated pedagogy.

The paper begins by describing the status and role of the eleven official languages in the public arena and the education system. It then outlines the development of the different home language syllabuses and curriculum statements over the last forty years and looks at the impact of the introduction of a common outcomes based curriculum in 1997.

A number of challenges are identified. Firstly, how to ensure that languages are taught and assessed at the same level of linguistic and intellectual challenge whilst acknowledging any differences that might exist. Secondly, how to ensure that specific curricula are authentic, reflecting each language's role and features, and enabling students to learn languages for purposes of identity and heritage as well as intellectual development. Thirdly, the challenge of accommodating a Second Additional Language in the school curriculum is addressed. Finally, the article concludes by arguing for an iterative approach in which curriculum development is seen as a long term, ongoing process.

INTRODUCTION

In 1994, after more than two centuries of colonialism and apartheid, South Africa became a constitutional democracy. The Constitution recognised the need to set right the inequalities of the past and gave official status to nine indigenous African languages in addition to English and Afrikaans, which were given this status in 1910 in the case of English, and 1925 in the case of Afrikaans. In a further step towards removing inequalities, the new government unified the racially stratified education system and introduced, for the first time, a common curriculum for all learners. This included a common, outcomes based curriculum for all eleven official languages, which has gradually become more standards based. This paper examines some of the challenges of designing and implementing a curriculum with common assessment standards in the context of continuing structural inequalities that originated in the past. It concludes by highlighting the conditions necessary to engage with these challenges and take the curriculum process forward.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGES IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

English and Afrikaans have been official languages for more or less a hundred years, which has established their dominance in the public sphere. Although Afrikaans was, until comparatively recently a vernacular (1) alongside Dutch, the fact that it was central to the political and ethnic identity of Afrikaans speaking people, meant that energy and resources were invested in its development (de Kadt, 2005). When a largely Afrikaans-speaking government came to power in 1948, it consolidated its position as a language of government, business, education and the arts. Although the political and economic importance of Afrikaans has diminished since 1994, it retains its capacity to be used for an extensive range of purposes both oral and written, for example, in higher education and the legal system, and it has a flourishing literature.

African languages such as isiZulu are majority languages in terms of their numbers of speakers (see Table 1 below), however, prior to 1994 their status and use in the public sphere was restricted, although as a result of the apartheid ‘homeland’ policy they did have a limited use in regional governance. Post-1994, little has changed; as Wright puts it, ‘an inherited social formation already possesses its own impetus’ (2003: unpagged), and in a rapidly modernising and globalising society, the dominance of English has gathered force.

Table 1: Number of home language speakers of official languages (Statistics South Africa 2003)

IsiZulu	10,677,305	IsiXhosa	7,907,155	Afrikaans	5,983,426
Sepedi	4,208,980	English	3,673,203	Setswana	3,667,016
Sesotho	3,555,186	Xitsonga	1,992,207	Siswati	1,194,430
Tshivenda	1,021,757	IsiNdebele	711,821		

However, there are also differences in status between African languages. From a national perspective, minority languages such as isiNdebele spoken by 1.6% of the South African population (Statistics South Africa, 2003), occupy a relatively marginal position. Whereas English and Afrikaans are spoken to a greater or lesser degree throughout the country, and majority languages such as isiZulu have substantial numbers of speakers in several provinces, isiNdebele is restricted to Mpumalanga. Furthermore, isiNdebele was not standardized until 1982, and it has only been taught as a school subject since 1985 following the proclamation of the apartheid ‘homeland’ of KwaNdebele in 1984 (Mahlangu, 2007). It did not become a university subject until 1996 (Lepota, 2012), although it is now offered at three South African universities.

It is evident, therefore, that the eleven official languages vary not only in their number of speakers, but also in terms of their past and present position in the society and the range of functions for which they are used. At national level, English is used for what Wright (2004: 176) describes as ‘higher order operational functions’. However, he recognizes that:

At the same time, African languages (including Afrikaans) continue to carry traditional riches of regional and local identity, the sense of social belonging, of heritage and cultural longings for their respective speech communities, comprising the vast majority of South Africans.

This systematic use of different languages for different purposes in multilingual societies has been termed ‘diglossia’ (Fishman, 1971: 75). Wright aptly describes the phenomenon in South Africa as ‘diglossic mutualism’ whereby English and African languages ‘assume important complementary roles’ (2004: 176). Clearly, however, this has implications for the trajectories of development of these languages, for the range and nature of texts available, and for people’s reasons for learning and studying them at school or university.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

The education system provides an arena in which languages are used for a range of literate purposes. Potentially it offers a space for the development of languages which are not used widely in the public sphere. However, although policy supports the use of African languages as languages of learning and teaching (LoLT), English and Afrikaans continue to occupy this role in Further Education and Training (FET) and at tertiary level whereas the use of African Languages as LoLT is restricted mainly to the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3), as can be seen from the Table 2 below.

Table 2 Percentage of learners by LoLT and Grade: 2007 (South Africa. Department of Basic Education, 2010)

Percentage of learners by LoLT and grade: 2007												
LoLT	Gr 1	Gr 2	Gr 3	Gr 4	Gr 5	Gr 6	Gr 7	Gr 8	Gr 9	Gr 10	Gr 11	Gr 12
Afrikaans	9.5	9.6	9.9	12.3	12.2	12.2	13.2	13.1	14.0	12.7	12.1	12.8
English	21.8	23.8	27.7	79.1	81.1	81.6	80.9	80.9	80.0	81.2	82.0	81.4
isiNdebele	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
isiXhosa	16.5	15.0	14.0	3.1	2.5	2.0	1.9	1.6	1.4	1.3	1.2	1.5
isiZulu	23.4	21.7	20.1	1.5	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.1
Sepedi	8.3	9.1	9.2	1.1	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.0
Sesotho	4.7	4.8	4.4	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.3
Setswana	7.5	7.4	6.8	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.3
Siswati	2.1	2.1	1.7	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Tshivenda	2.2	2.4	2.4	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.5
Xitsonga	3.1	3.3	3.1	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

English and Afrikaans, having been used at all levels of education in the past, have developed linguistic registers, for example those of science and mathematics, to support teaching, learning and materials development. English, and to a lesser extent Afrikaans, are therefore

seen as the ‘natural’ choice as LoLT, and in the case of English, this is reinforced by the fact that it is increasingly used in higher education internationally (MacGregor, 2011). This exerts a downward pressure, constraining the development of academic registers in African languages and limiting their use in education. It also reinforces a dimension of diglossia wherein African languages tend to be used for speech and English for reading and writing, including formal assessment. This self-perpetuating process has implications for the creation and maintenance of common assessment standards.

LANGUAGE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Prior to 1994, there were separate syllabuses and examinations for languages in South Africa, which reflected different purposes, pedagogies and world views. All learners were required to study both a ‘first’ and a ‘second language’. English and Afrikaans, the official languages, had both first and second language syllabuses whereas African languages could only be studied as first or ‘third’ languages. In this context, different approaches to teaching have evolved with their own assumptions, not only about standards, but also about the purposes of language teaching and assessment.

In 1969, separate syllabuses for English and Afrikaans First Language (the equivalent of Home Language) were introduced for the first time. At this stage, African languages had a common syllabus, which according to Prinsloo (2002; 2004) was strongly influenced by that of Afrikaans. In 1989 separate syllabuses were introduced for African languages with the exception of isiNdebele and Siswati, which at that time were not taught in South African schools.

During this period, the Afrikaans and African First Language syllabuses had a greater focus on grammar and phonology than English, both drawing on structural linguistics, and a more academic approach to the study of literature (Prinsloo, 2002; 2004; Prinsloo & Janks, 2002). Prinsloo suggests that this was because African languages and Afrikaans were newly standardised languages, but it may also reflect the influence of European pedagogical traditions on Afrikaans.

English first language, on the other hand, was strongly influenced by the British curriculum, where the focus was on literature and the close, critical reading of texts. Grammar tended to be taught and examined contextually, using a wide range of texts. In 1973 a personal growth approach was introduced (Prinsloo & Janks, 2002), which encouraged learners to express themselves freely in speech and writing; creativity was highly valued (Janks, 1990).

According to Prinsloo (2002), by 1994 Afrikaans First Language – and to a lesser extent, African languages – were drawing closer to English, but they retained aspects of earlier syllabuses – they were still essentially structural and skills based. There were also substantial differences in what Prinsloo (2004: 82) calls the ‘worlding’ of the texts used in examinations (and by extension the curriculum) and thus in the identities constructed for learners.

Up until 1986 the second language syllabuses for both English and Afrikaans adopted an audiolingual approach to language teaching, rooted in structural linguistics and behaviourist learning theory. This was replaced in 1986 by a communicative syllabus. Comparing the English first and second language syllabuses, Janks (1990: 251) noted that the second

language syllabus focused on ‘functional competence across the four skills’ whereas the first language syllabus aimed at fostering ‘self-confidence, originality, creativity, self-understanding.’

THE INTRODUCTION OF A COMMON CURRICULUM FOR LANGUAGES

In 1997 a common curriculum was introduced for all the newly proclaimed eleven official languages. This curriculum, conceptualized and written in English, was outcomes based; responsibility for deciding how to achieve the outcomes was placed on teachers. The curriculum was influenced externally by Anglophone countries such as Australia, and internally by labour unions and the People’s Education movement formed in the 1980s in opposition to apartheid education (Butler, 1994; Janks, 1990). One of the central tenets of People’s English was ‘critical language awareness’ expressed in the following statement by Janks (1990: 257):

People’s English should enable learners to read texts and to resist them where necessary. The ideological functioning of all language must be explored and the plurality of meaning must be teased out so that learners are capable of formulating critical responses to texts.

This represented a major shift for the English curriculum, but infinitely more so for the Afrikaans and African language curricula, which were now being driven by an Anglocentric worldview.

This new curriculum rejected the distinction between first and second language speakers, since there was perceived to exist what Janks (1990: 243) describes as ‘subtle undertones of “second-language, second-class”’ in South African society. Instead a distinction was made between studying ‘main languages’ and ‘additional languages.’ Typically, the ‘main language’ would also be the LoLT.

By the end of the nineties it had become evident that there were serious problems in implementing outcomes based education (Chisholm, 2003; Jansen, 1999). With regard to the curriculum for Language, Literacy and Communication as the subject was then called, Janks (2001: 241) critiqued the limited way in which critical language awareness was interpreted ‘in the progress maps or standards.’ In 2001 the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) was introduced to streamline and strengthen the curriculum, providing a common set of standards for teaching and assessing languages. Again, the curriculum statement was conceptualised in English albeit by a multilingual team of language educators and linguists. However, this time the core document was translated or ‘versioned’ (2) into the other ten languages, although only the English version was published for public comment, restricting engagement with the construction of the curriculum largely to English speakers. In some ways this curriculum was more conservative since the six outcomes were organized in terms of the following skills and knowledge: listening, speaking, reading and viewing, thinking and reasoning, and language structure and use. Nevertheless, it retained elements, such as media, visual and critical literacies, which were still relatively unfamiliar to many teachers, especially African language teachers and those teaching in rural areas (Mbelani, 2007).

To bring the curriculum in line with the Language in Education Policy (1997), which advocates additive multilingualism (3), the RNCS introduced separate curricula for ‘Home Language’, ‘First Additional Language’ and ‘Second Additional Language.’ Since the majority of learners who study English as their First Additional Language are also using it as their LoLT, ambitious standards were set for this curriculum to enable learners to achieve similar levels of proficiency to those of Home Language speakers by the FET phase. The Second Additional Language, on the other hand, was a less demanding curriculum intended for students who wished to learn to communicate in the language in order to participate in a multilingual society.

In 2011, the large number of curriculum documents that had proliferated was rationalized into a single Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for each phase of the curriculum (Dada et al, 2009). There is a separate statement for Home Language and First Additional Language, but there is no longer a place for a Second Additional Language in the school curriculum. These statements are highly prescriptive, stating exactly what should be taught and assessed term by term. Again, this curriculum was conceptualized and written in English, with only the English version being published for public comment. The final statement was versioned into the other ten languages.

CHALLENGES

The reason for introducing common outcomes for all languages in 1997 was to ensure that they were taught and examined with the same degree of seriousness and standards of excellence. A further goal was to develop African languages by extending the ‘domains and contexts denied them previously’ (Musker & Nomvete, 1995: 74). However, it was intended that the outcomes should be written ‘broadly’ (Alexander, 1995: 105); Mclean (1997), for example, maintained that common outcomes should be written at a sufficient level of generality to accommodate discursive differences between languages. Alexander warned that, ‘Too tight a specification of outcomes can limit or even negate the exploratory nature of the education process’ (1995: 105).

However, with the intention of giving teachers more guidance, the assessment standards – conceptualized in English – have become increasingly specific. An unintended consequence of this is that English is shaping the curricula of all the other languages. In some ways this is not a bad thing since vast resources have been put into the development of English curricula internationally, and they offer ways of imagining how other language curricula might be created. There is value in modernizing the curriculum for African languages, for example, by extending the range of texts to be read and written, and encouraging more critical engagement with texts. However, this needs to be done sensitively and creatively, in ways that are authentic. Furthermore, there are limits to the changes that can be effected through the curriculum, for example, if the only place in which learners encounter an advertisement in isiNdebele is the textbook or the examination, it is unconvincing.

For students to be motivated to learn their languages, they must have genuine reasons for doing so. In a multilingual society, there are likely to be somewhat different reasons for learning one’s home and additional languages. If African home language curricula become mirror images of English, the motivation to learn these languages for purposes of identity and heritage, and to take them forward in innovative and culturally appropriate ways, will be lost.

Local research in the fields of multilingualism and multimodality may point the way forward (Cope & Kalantzis, 2006; Nyirahuku & Hoenig, 2006; Ferreira 2006).

There are some specific aspects of the curriculum for which the use of an English model is particularly problematic, for example, the teaching of phonics in the Foundation Phase. English and African languages differ morphologically and orthographically, and different approaches to teaching phonics may be required. Research suggests that it is easier and takes less time to learn to decode in transparent orthographies such as those of African languages than in opaque orthographies such as English (Abadzi, 2008; Durgunoglu, 2006). More research is needed into this aspect of the curriculum.

Another aspect which is problematic is the approach to teaching 'language structure and use', which is modeled on an English, contextual method. Applying this method to Afrikaans and African languages may not be accepted by educators and indeed may not be appropriate. In a recent evaluation of the Home Language National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, Afrikaans and African language evaluators were unanimous that 'the grammar questions were limited in number, extremely easy and did not prepare students for studying languages at university' (Murray, 2012: 29); they felt this would impact negatively on the way grammar was taught in schools. This may have the effect of opening up a gap in Afrikaans and African languages between what is taught at schools and what is required in undergraduate language study at university. Here there needs to be dialogue between curriculum developers and university language departments.

There are other practical challenges to achieving equivalence in outcomes for all Home Language curricula. For example, most English and Afrikaans speaking learners are using their home languages for academic purposes throughout the school day. African language speakers, on the other hand, only study their languages as subjects for 4 or 5 hours a week once they enter the Intermediate Phase since English is the LoLT from that stage onwards. In addition, there is a more limited range of texts available in African languages, especially in minority languages such as isiNdebele and Tshivenda, which inhibits the achievement of high levels of literacy in these languages (Pretorius & Currin, 2010). Taken together these factors militate against African language speakers achieving the same standards in their Home Language as English and Afrikaans speaking learners. However, the fact that there are substantial numbers of learners studying English and Afrikaans Home Language who are not native speakers, may act as a counterbalance.

There are challenges, too, with regard to the First Additional Language curriculum. This curriculum was conceptualized in English and had in mind learners using English as their LoLT, in practice, mainly African students. As mentioned above it is an ambitious curriculum but realistic for the learners in question since they will be exposed to English as an additional language throughout the school day. However, the curriculum would be extremely difficult for learners who were only studying their First Additional Language as a subject for under 4 hours per week in the Foundation Phase and between 4 and 5 hours thereafter. It would be especially difficult for students learning a non-cognate language, for example, an English speaker learning isiZulu First Additional Language. It is a matter of concern, therefore, that with the introduction of the CAPS the opportunity to study a Second Additional Language has been removed from the curriculum. Taken together these factors militate against English and Afrikaans speakers studying African languages at school. Currently, in fact, the majority of learners who take African languages as First Additional

Languages are mother tongue speakers of these languages in former Model C schools, who are well able to achieve the assessment standards. However, by setting the bar unrealistically high, this further discourages non-mother tongue speakers from learning an additional African language.

These anomalies raise questions about the use of terms such as ‘home language’ and ‘additional language’ and more generally about the appropriacy of an additive bi/multilingual model. In urban areas where multilingualism is the norm and a repertoire of languages is used to achieve different purposes, these notions are perhaps unnecessary (Makoni, 1994). Here it might be more appropriate to teach languages alongside each other in a complementary fashion from the earliest years of schooling to develop bilingualism and bi-literacy (Bloch & Alexander, 2011). However, in rural areas of provinces such as the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal where a single language dominates (4), an additive model makes more sense. Learners in this context would acquire literacy initially in their home language, and gradually transfer these skills to their additional language as their oral proficiency in this language developed.

CONCLUSION

There are no simple answers to the challenges outlined above. Clearly, there is a need for curricula to be responsive to the character of specific languages, to the purposes for which they are used and the amount of time that is available to study them. However, appropriate curricula are not developed overnight. They are the result of an iterative process in which curriculum developers design the best curriculum statements possible given their current state of knowledge, and teachers do their best to interpret these statements and put them into practice thus creating the enacted curriculum. In this process, tensions emerge and gaps between the intended and enacted curriculum become evident. These should provide the stimulus for research, reflection and debate, which make possible the next iteration of the curriculum.

For this process to be effective curriculum developers need to be experts in the language subject area and its associated pedagogy. They should be knowledgeable about curriculum development and familiar with the historical antecedents of the curriculum in question. This would enable them to foresee as far as possible the unintended consequences of decisions and to make wise choices where trade-offs are necessary. It is the task of academics and postgraduate students to do the research that provides the knowledge base from which informed decisions can be made, and the job of the Department of Basic Education to provide the logistical support necessary to make long term curriculum development possible.

END NOTES

1. The term ‘vernacular’ is sometimes used to describe local, oral varieties of language carrying cultural heritage, social identity and sense of belonging; in essence languages of ‘heart and hearth’, which can be subtle and sophisticated in the manner in which they communicate these meanings. All standard languages began as vernaculars; they are those varieties which for social and political reasons were written down, standardised, acquired a literature and became used for a wider range of purposes beyond the local.
2. The term ‘versioning’ referred to a translation of the core curriculum (written in English) and reinterpretation of aspects where necessary, for example, descriptions of grammatical forms.

3. In 'additive bilingualism' the first language (or mother tongue) continues to be developed and its associated culture valued while the second language is added. In subtractive bilingualism, on the other hand, the second language is learned at the expense of the second language and culture, which diminish as a consequence (Cummins & Swain, 1986). The Language in Education Policy (1997) refers to 'additive multilingualism' which implies learning more one additional language.
4. For example, in the Eastern Cape 87.8% of learners are isiXhosa speaking and in the following education districts over 99% of learners speak isiXhosa: Bizana (99.9%), Butterworth (99.9%), Cofimbvaba (99.6%), Engcobo (99.7%), Libode (99.5%) and Lusikisiki (99.4%) (Pluddemann, Mbude-Shale & Waba, 1005).

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