

# **Language: The Gatekeeper of Humanity. Implications of South Africa's Language in Education Policies**

**Judy J. May**

*Bowling Green State University*

## **Abstract**

*English is perceived as the language of the powerful elite as well as a tool of oppression and dehumanization. English, as the medium of instruction in South Africa, functions as the barrier to full societal participation of native speakers (Webb, 2003, p.1) and the gatekeeper of humanity. This study combines historical and qualitative methods to examine the impact of South Africa's language in education policies. The author asserts that language is used as a weapon of oppression against those of different languages and cultures (Sarabia, 2003, p.2) perpetuating an unjust order with implications beyond the borders of the African continent.*

The English language is perceived throughout the world as the language of power and prestige (Garcia, 2004). Language, writes Geras (1995) can be viewed as “a set of tools and instruments that enable us to cope and deal with the world in one way or another and to pursue happiness, needs and wants” (p.114). Those who share languages and cultural identities different from that of the dominant are often perceived as functioning with a deficiency stemming from the very identities they claim (Nieto, 2002, p. xi). As history aptly recounts, language has been used by those in power as a weapon of oppression against languages, cultures and traditions (Sarabia, 2003, p.2). Oppression, according to Freire (1970), is a loss of humanity and the ongoing struggle of the oppressed to regain such. Dehumanization, as a historical reality, is not a given destiny, but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed (p. 28). In few places is the use of language as a tool of oppression and dehumanization more pervasive than in post-apartheid South Africa. Pattanayak (1985) writes:

Language politics is intimately connected with economics and resource planning. Unless resources are so developed that sub-groups within a region or culture or groups within a culturally diverse nation get equal opportunity for their creative fulfillment, language is bound to be used for divisive purposes (p. 403).

While language, education and social mobility are undeniably bound to some extent in most countries, South Africa's history predisposes that these concepts will be inextricably inter-reliant. Education remains a gatekeeper to further opportunities for most, and these opportunities are influenced by the quality of education to which a people have access (Nieto, p. 57). English in South Africa remains the language of the elite and is perceived as the only means by which societal mobility is achieved (Kamwangamalu, 2000, p. 121). In South Africa, “English qualifies as the language of learning, without which one can do nothing, cannot get a job, and cannot succeed in life” (Kamwangamalu, 2003, p. 236).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of language as a tool of oppression, dehumanization and injustice in post-apartheid South Africa. First discussed is an epigrammatic perspective of the historical significance of language in South Africa. Secondly, the study briefly presents the perceptions of Language in Education Policies from a variety of educational lenses. And lastly, the researcher discusses oppression as a tool of dehumanization. The author argues that while the effect of language policies in South Africa may lead the reader to believe these issues exist in a vacuum sealed by a continental divide, the ideological perspectives and dogma of oppression and dehumanization are contextually universal.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

South Africa is comprised of 44.8 million people with approximately 80% using one of nine African languages as their mother-tongue (Statistics South Africa, 2003). While there are eleven African languages, Afrikaans and English are the languages of the powerful and elite and have historically played a significant role in the power base in South Africa. During apartheid, South Africa was considered a bilingual state with English and Afrikaans as the only two solitary languages. The onset of a democratic state in 1994 led to the promotion of all eleven languages as official state languages in an attempt to bring status to the native African speaking people.

### **Significance of Language in South Africa**

Language, as an effective tool of power and control, has been laden with conflict for centuries in South Africa. The struggle for language control dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the clashes for power between the Dutch and the British. While this paper deals more specifically with the linguistic implications of native Black languages in the current South Africa, at the core of the language struggles in South Africa is the debate over what language is utilized as the medium of instruction in schools.

### **Parallel, Duel, and Monolingual Medium Schooling**

Parallel-medium schooling refers to classes geared toward each student's mother-tongue in the same school building, and dual-medium systems suppose a continuum of language integration with students educated in common classrooms. Monolingual medium schools presume that only one language will serve as the medium of instruction and is largely interpreted as a segregationist measure and a view reflective of apartheid. The use of Afrikaans as monolingual education on the part of the Dutch was a political fight for what the Dutch referred to as their preservation and salvation (Reagan, 1988). To this day the Afrikaans language remains the language of apartheid for most native speaking Africans.

### **The Ideological Value Assigned to Language**

Spencer (as cited in Mda, 1997) asserts that language is a three pronged dynamic embodying structural, functional, and symbolic significance. Accordingly Spencer surmises that all languages are equal on the structural level and the functionality of language merely requires lexical expansion to meet growing economic, social, cultural and technical needs. It is the symbolic representation and the lack of value placed on some languages that present pervasive obstacles for black South Africans. Language differences are not oppressive in and of themselves; the concern is the socially constructed meanings of inferiority that accompanies their use and the culture and traditions attached to them (Nieto, p. 112). Mda cites further research by Spencer who writes that scant worth is placed on the native African languages and those who

speak them. Nieto supports Spencer's assertion noting that "race itself is not what makes a difference in people's attitudes, behaviors, and values, but rather how particular racial groups are valued or devalued by society (p. 54).

### **Bantu Act No. 47 and Language in Education Policy of 1997(1996)**

South African history reflects many Acts aimed at controlling the language usage patterns of native Blacks through education. Two Acts are presented for the purposes of this paper; the *Bantu Act No. 47 of 1953 and The Language in Education Policy Act of 1997*. Acts such as these came on the heels of the Dutch and British struggles and led to the gradual demise of dual and parallel-medium schooling (Reagan, 1988) mandating instead, mother tongue as the medium of instruction for Blacks. The Bantu Act No. 47 of 1953, also known as the "Slave Education Act" (Grober, 1988, p. 103, as cited in Kamwangamalu, 2000) was fueled by Afrikaans speaking South Africans who perceived the acquisition of the English language by Blacks as a threat to the superiority of their language (Mda).

The goals of the Language-in-Education Policy Act 27 of 1997 were to recognize the historically diminished status of the nine native indigenous languages and take practical and positive measures to elevate their status. In so doing, all 11 languages were made official to promote multilingualism through the use of the student's mother tongue as an early medium of instruction to third grade.

### **Covert Goals of Language in Education Policies**

The covert goals of these Acts according to the Research Education in South Africa (as cited Kamwangamalu, 2000) were (a) "to protect white workers from the threat of native African competition for skilled jobs, (b) to meet the demands of white farmers for unskilled African labor; (c) to produce a black population only educated to a level considered adequate for unskilled work and subordinated, and (d) to ensure a people who would also accept its subordination and inferior education as natural for a 'racially inferior' people" (p.1-2,6).

As a result, the ironclad apartheid system remains staunchly entrenched by educating each African group in their own mother-tongue leaving the whites to be educated in English. Language becomes "the yardstick for segregated education" (Kamwangamalu, 2000, p. 124), oppression and dehumanization.

### **METHODS**

This study utilized a historical approach combined with qualitative case studies to examine the implications of South Africa's Language in Education Policies. Historical research seeks to support theoretical positions in addition to drawing parallels between past and present events. The qualitative point of view promotes an understanding of how individuals perceive and attach meaning to their world and a case study approach allows the researcher to more fully "illustrate the complexity of causation" (Krathwohl, 1993, p. 347). This study utilized semi-structured open-ended interviews and the constant comparison method in an effort to link concepts to explain a phenomenon. The constant comparison method permitted the researcher to explore the multi-dimensional Language in Education Policy from the diverse perceptions of educational personnel. Rooted in the grounded theory approach the researcher sought to expound on the impact of current and historical events from a variety of lenses. Grounded theory, according to

Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a general theory of scientific method concerned with the generation, elaboration, and validation of social science theory. This paper seeks to examine the sociological phenomenon of oppression through the use of language. In addition to historical research (policies and documents), direct observation and open-ended interviews were employed with a purposive sample to describe how school and government personnel perceive the implementation of language in education policies.

### **Participants and Research Questions**

The qualitative portion of the study involved interviewing 10 teachers, 6 administrators, 4 supervisors, 2 Department of Education members and the U.S. Consulate General from South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal Province. The study participants were South African educators and policy-makers who were part of a tour of site-visits organized for a delegation of educators from the mid-western United States, of which the researcher was a member. Some of the South African teachers had traveled to the United States for a reciprocal educational experience earlier in the year. The study participants were queried as to the (a) historical impact of South Africa's language policies on successful matriculation of students through the system, (b) the obstacles associated with the implementation of current policies integrating the student's mother tongue as a medium of early instruction, and (c) the paradoxical nature of theory into practice (see Appendix for question protocol).

The researcher used fieldnotes to record the responses to the semi-structured open-ended interviews. While the questions were presented in a preset order, maintenance of the contextual richness of the data necessitated allowing the participants to control the flow and pace of information sharing. Mishler (1986) notes that "we are more likely to find stories reported in studies where respondents are invited to speak in their own voices, allowed to control the introduction and flow of topics, and encouraged to extend their responses" (p. 69).

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Data were collected during early summer 2006 in primary and secondary schools in the KwaZulu-Natal Province in the cities of Pietermaritzburg, Johannesburg, and Durbin as well as their subsequent rural township areas. Data were also collected during an interview with the U.S. Consulate General in Durbin and attendance at an educational policy information sharing session with the Mayor of Pietermaritzburg.

Using the constant comparison method (Krathwohl, 1993), fieldnotes collected during interviews were analyzed and coded following each dialogue in an effort to elucidate emergent themes and concepts and guide the focus of the next interview. Each successive interview participant was chosen in an effort to link the concepts introduced in previous interviews. Data were reduced and categorized according to participant position/title. Because the responses of the participants were context and culture dependent, the investigator attempted to gather a realm of interpretations of a single phenomenon and true qualitative triangulation and member-checks were not employed. The participant responses revealed opposing perceptions of a single phenomenon.

## **FINDINGS**

From a historical perspective the research suggests that over two centuries of racial and language policies in South Africa create a compelling argument for a continued pattern of racial, economical, and educational oppression. This argument appears to find support from the qualitative findings in this investigation suggesting an insurmountable chasm between the perceptions of the personnel responsible for direct service delivery to learners and the policy-makers. The discussion reflects three themes: a) the nexus between the qualitative responses and the historical perspective of South Africa, b) the role of language in the maintenance of the oppressed state, and c) the ideological and universal nature of the role of language, literacy, culture and oppression.

### **Themes from Teachers**

Teacher respondents included four primary teachers and six secondary teachers. The majority of them were veteran teachers save two, who were novice teachers with less than five years experience. All the teachers express dissatisfaction with the lack of progress relative to the implementation of the language in education policies. Their responses indicate that while they acknowledge advances made in the post-apartheid era, their current educational status is inextricably tied to the historical marginalization of Blacks in South Africa. While the teachers teach in under resourced, overcrowded schools, their dissatisfaction rests not necessarily with their lack of resources, but with their inability to adequately meet the needs of their learners.

***Lack of resources.*** A lack of adequate resources is perhaps the most pervasive theme expressed by the teachers. One primary teacher laments that she has learned to make due with what is available, which includes a lack of books and those available are often sadly outdated. A secondary teacher points out that what should be one of their most important subjects, career education, is lacking the equipment and supplies necessary to teach the subjects. The stoves are inoperable, the sinks do not have running water, and there are no computers. A secondary science teacher expresses similar concerns noting a lack of all basic supplies, such as routine chemicals and equipment. Adequate plumbing was a concern at all but one school.

***Language in education policy.*** The respondents overwhelmingly report that the language in education policies create discriminatory barriers in Black schools due to the lack of support and funding for implementation. One teacher reports that it is the “language of power vs. the language of instruction.” They also express pessimism regarding change, noting that little is going to change because attitudes have not changed. One primary teacher busily copied workbook exercises by hand while we talked because the shortage of materials necessitates she make 1 workbook for 4 learners to share. She quietly notes that her English is not the greatest and she has learners in her third grade class of 48 that speak a language of which she is not as familiar as she should be, so translation is a challenge. Secondary teachers cite extremely high mobility rates and an influx of learners from other provinces, thus increasing native/English language barriers. Additionally, the fact that all secondary exams are given in English presents an insurmountable barrier to graduation for many.

***Dissatisfaction with policy-makers.*** The teachers assert that those making policy decisions are removed from the real problems. Teachers at both the primary and secondary levels note that district and department of education personnel do not visit the schools often, and even when they

do changes do not seem to occur. One young male teacher charges that “as long as we can’t get anywhere down here, they do not have to worry about us up there.”

### **Themes from Administrators and Supervisors**

Administrative respondents included three secondary principals, three primary principals, and four supervisors/department heads. The administrators and supervisors also express dissatisfaction with the lack of progress relative to the language in education policies although their discomfort emanates from a number of different sources.

***Unresponsive policy-makers.*** School leaders at all levels reflect distrust on the part of the Department of Education policy-makers. The distrust, one administrator surmises, is because of the lack of responsiveness on the part of the Department of Education. “We need materials; they say they are ordered, we wait, and don’t get anything and then it starts all over again. And there is no money in the school budget for materials.” The administrators appear to have strong issues with the discrepancy between the theory and the practice of the language policies. One principal states, “It seems that once they write it down on paper, stamp it, and tell us what to do, they are all done. We have no money, no support, and no one coming to ask us how’s it going.”

***Discriminatory practices.*** Administrators note that the imbalance between native Black schools and those attended by whites and Indians is like day and night. In our Black schools the majority of the children do not have the money to pay tuition, the facilities are decrepit and the student teacher ratio is often 50 to 1. One secondary principal in a countryside school reports that “some of our learners must walk 8 kilometers on rocky, dusty roads and they arrive with no food for the day. This, of course, becomes an issue because we don’t have funds to provide a lunch. Additionally, there is no health care, aids is rampant, and teenage pregnancy is on the rise. These are conditions that are not as apparent in Indian schools and non-existent in white schools.”

***Language in education policy.*** “Language of power is the language of instruction and the policy on paper is not the workings of the schools.” These powerful words were spoken by a secondary social studies supervisor who claims the system is set up to suit some groups; Whites mostly and thusly damns the Blacks. Another administrator laments that “parents are not involved, they do not know or understand how to help their children; they need to know that there is no justice for their children at school. We do not know the native languages and they don’t know English. This is working badly.” One Indian principal positively cites the many improvements that have occurred such as facilities for all children to attend school and the fact that they are soon to receive a new toilet/plumbing system.

It is important to note that while the teachers and administrators openly discussed the challenges of schooling in South Africa, much of this sentiment was tempered with what this researcher perceived as an essence of thankfulness for the improved state of South Africa.

### **Theme from the Dept of Education, the U.S. Consulate General’s Office and the Mayor**

The U.S Consulate General, a Senior Public Affairs Advisor, an educational liaison, and a representative from the Department of Education served as the interview participants. Strong contrasts exist between the perceptions of the teachers and administrators and the members of the Department of Education and the U.S. Consulate General. Policy-makers appear somewhat

oblivious to the concerns of the teachers and administrators. The Department of Education personnel believe conditions are markedly improved for learners and teachers. Said a Department of Education representative, “The government is working; we are getting better; it has never been better for South Africans.”

The U.S. Consulate General voices even stronger views on the positive functioning of the schools in the KwaZulu-Natal Province. He focuses heavily on the new and renewed openness of the government and the spirit of cooperation created in the last eight years. He strongly endorses the positives set forth in the language in education policy and herald the fact that more respect is being afforded the native languages and their speakers. Additionally, the educational liaison expounded on the many opportunities for students to study abroad and attend university.

Further, the Consulate and his Senior Advisor described a society in transition. While they acknowledge the great disparity between the wealthy and the poor, the magnitude of their discussion did not compare to the unparalleled plight of the poor expressed by the teachers and administrators. Researcher observations from the policy sharing session from the Mayor indicates a woman who, while clearly reared with privileged advantage, has committed her office to numerous programs for the uplifting of “girl learners,” and empowering Black South Africans. While conceding the need for improvements, the mayoral office positively supports the provinces’ educational policies.

## **DISCUSSION**

The qualitative responses reveal divergent perceptions between those responsible for service delivery in the schools and those charged with policy development. Given the historical context of race, power and the nation’s early stages of democratic development, this comes as no surprise to the reader. The service delivery side report difficulty in implementing policies with inadequately crippling funding and little Department of Education support. Additionally, teachers and administrators point to the lack of policy monitoring on any level.

Conversely, the policy-making side presents a picture of great strides and increased growth in the system. Further, they feel that many opportunities are available for students that did not exist before. Because apartheid was so oppressive and controlling for Blacks, the government seems to perceive that the outward removal of policies reflecting apartheid show remarkable strides and indeed is a gift to the powerless majority. Analysis of the participant responses finds that both sides oddly represent an accurate picture considering the lens from which their picture is painted. David Ferrero (2003) writes that pedagogical and curricular beliefs are extensions of more comprehensive philosophical doctrines that are in turn colored by ideological ones. Educational doctrines reflect metaphysical, epistemological, and ideological commitments conditioned in part by identity and a certain understanding of history and society (p.2).

Another emergent theme was both surprising and disconcerting. While discussing areas in need of improvement, this researcher noticed a consistent underlying “essence” on the part of teachers and administrators that seemed to parallel that of the governmental policy-makers. Although teachers were expressing areas in need of improvement, they also interjected continuous comments relative to how “bad” it used to be and how much “better” life has become. They even appeared grateful for the privilege to breathe “free air.” This “essence,” as

interpreted by the researcher, leads to attitudes of acceptance and continued voluntary dominance. The researcher also sensed an essence of being so thankful for the lifting of lawful oppression that they are not entitled to further equality. While the reasoning for these feelings was initially unclear to the researcher, Freire elucidates on the ideological perspectives of the dominated in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

### **Power, Oppression, and Dehumanization**

According to Freire (1970) a source of power for oppressors is in the continued dehumanization of the oppressed. Systematic dehumanization involves the perpetuation of injustice that is not recognized as such by the oppressed. Creating a continued dependence on the oppressors is essential to systematic injustice. This injustice is often perpetuated in the “false generosity” of the oppressors. “An unjust social order is the permanent source of this generosity, which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty.” (p.29). Much like a slave is grateful for the blessing to escape a lashing, the direct service providers in this study appear grateful for the blessing of escaping apartheid and the freedom to have a school and access to running water. It is clearly illustrated and yet difficult for the researcher to reconcile that the consciousness of the oppressed state seems to elude the oppressed. Weffort (as cited in Freire) explains that this lack of consciousness is essential to the oppressors as “the awakening of critical consciousness leads the way to expression of social discontents precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation” (p. 20).

### **Language as the Gatekeeper of Humanity**

“Language is one of the fundamental signs of our humanity. It is the palette from which people color their lives and culture” (Allman as cited in Nieto, 2002, p. 96). Nieto maintains that the value of language and culture is essential in supporting and sustaining academic achievement (p.91). But, as language serves to unite, it also serves to divide. English and the lack of English proficiency on the part of teachers and students is a pervasive issue that does not appear to be improving. In the years since apartheid was officially removed from the books, over 70% of native speaking Africans still do not comprehend English (Pan South African Language Board, 2000). In fact, Beukes (2004) asserts that English remains unattainable for the majority of South Africans (p.17). Theoretically, English was to be the pathway to liberation, but in practice the vast number of black South Africans have not been able realize its benefits.

### **Ideological Perspective of Mother-Tongue Instruction**

From a theoretical perspective, using the mother-tongue as medium of instruction for the primary years and English thereafter, may have its merits. However, in practice the system begins as a failure due to the lack of resources to hire teachers who are proficient in the native languages, the lack of English proficient teachers, and the pervasive overcrowding in classrooms. Resulting are learners who are not learning in their own tongue, learners who are not learning effective English, and learners who cannot communicate effectively with one another.

While it appears culturally progressive to preserve usage of the nine native languages, the lack of a united shared language, including English, further stifles Black learners’ preparation to emerge from oppression. Succumbing to a “divide and rule” mentality, the writings of Freire suggest that ideologically these policies serve a more covert purpose. “The minority cannot permit itself the luxury of tolerating the unification of the people, which would undoubtedly

signify a serious threat to their own hegemony. It is of interest to the oppressor to weaken the oppressed still further, to isolate them, to create and deepen rifts among them; from government bureaucracy to the forms of cultural action with which they manipulate the people by giving them the impression that they are being helped (p. 137).

### **The Ideological Relationship of Language, Literacy, Culture and Oppression**

English is used as the official or semi-official language in over 60 countries. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports, international business, and academia (Crystal, 1987). As part of the educational process English and knowledge acquisition cannot be neutral (Freire; Nieto). At issue in this article is not the use of English, but the power and prestige connoted in its use and the “low prestige, limited power,” and inferiority attached to the people and culture of those using other languages (Nieto, p. 82).

Language as the gatekeeper of humanity is not limited to South Africa. Pennycook (1994) notes that 90% of secondary education around the globe is in English and is “detrimental to the large majority of students” (p.23) and So postulates that English medium schooling has caused learning problems for many students (as cited in Pennycook, 1994). Brand (2004) fears that the tools of social injustice are shifting from “race as a marker of privilege and mobility to English as a marker of opportunity and privilege.” (p. 17). Naysmith (as cited in Pennycook, 1994) purports that English is the means by which political, economic, and cultural dominance over another is gained (p. 21). The use of English as an elite property has increased ten-fold since 1900 in countries throughout the world such as South East Asia, Australia, and India (Pattanayak; Pennycook).

### **SUMMARY**

This researcher, in analysis of the writings of Freire, suggests that the language in education policies of South Africa are “manifestations of dehumanization” (p. 33) perpetuated to support the ideological beliefs of the ruling minority. Moreover, the oppressed, twistedly grateful to their oppressive “benefactors,” are so far removed from the realization of their unwitting stasis that liberation is not in their consciousness. Additionally, Freire postulates an essential question, “How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing pedagogy of their liberation?” (p.33). This researcher agrees that without consciousness of their oppression; they cannot. The language in education policies in South Africa, as well as the global use of English, has become a convenient and effective gatekeeper of humanity. Language, literacy and culture cannot be divorced from one another, and the historical underpinnings of South Africa obstruct efforts to place value on one and not the other. Pennycook cites the need for continued examination of the global proliferation of English as a connection to social and economic power, within and between nations, as well its role in the sustenance of injustice (p.23).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

As with most studies, the findings create more questions than answers. The participant responses here merely add to the existing questions and serve to answer few. There is a tome to learn regarding the policies relative language as a tool of dehumanization in South Africa and the world. If our interest truly rests in the liberation of the oppressed, the findings of this study as well as existing research strongly support the need for continued analysis relative to the use of language to limit the economic, social, and cultural participation of marginalized peoples.

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## Appendix Question Protocol

### Teacher Questions

- What is your native language?
- When did you first begin to learn English?
- What type of certification do you hold and where did you obtain it?
- What is the mission of your school?
- What parts of the government do you draw support?
- How long have you been teaching and what locations?
- Can you explain how the differentiated language instruction works here?
- What type of materials do you use to teach?
- How have teaching conditions changed in the last 15 years?
- What do you teach and how many students are in your class?
- What languages do your students speak?
- What languages do you speak?
- What is the most difficult part of your job?
- What would you change if you could?

### Administrators/Supervisors/Department Head Questions

- What is the most difficult part of your job?
- What is the mission of your school?
- What parts of the government do you draw support?
- What is your typical day like?
- Can you explain how the differentiated language instruction works here?
- Where do your students go from here?
- What is the cost to attend your school?
- What percentage of the students actually pay?
- What other funding do you have for materials?
- What would you change if you could?

U.S. Consulate and Department of Education Questions

What are the most difficult challenges in your job?

What is your office's role in the system?

How has the education system changed for Blacks in the last 15 years?

What policies do you perceive have been most helpful to Black South Africans? Why?

What are the different departments and for what are they responsible?

In what ways has life changed for Blacks?

What would you change if you could?