Teaching multilingual South African learners: Reflections on a long history of segregation, valorisation and legitimisation

Posted on August 14, 2024 by Xolisa Guzula
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=””]Multilingual education is one way to transform the South African (SA) Education system from historical biases that have privileged white English and Afrikaans children. As a South African academic specialising in multilingual and multiliteracies education, I create third spaces with Xhosa-English bilingual children that were not available to me.

In our education system, bilingualism that centres English is preferred to Indigenous multilingualism. This preference has been the result of a long history favouring English and to some extent Afrikaans as the only mediums of instruction in education. These two languages became the two official languages after the Union of 1910 between the Dutch and the British. From 1925, to show cooperation between the two colonial settlers,

schools became bilingual English/Afrikaans institutions. Dual medium schools saw these two languages used simultaneously as mediums of instruction by a bilingual teacher with accompanying bilingual materials for English and Afrikaans learners. In the same schools, what is referred to as parallel mediums saw Afrikaans and English-speaking learners allocated their language-specific classes. English/Afrikaans schools that teach either of the two languages as subjects are a unique privilege for white English and Afrikaans children.

Meanwhile, children speaking African languages including isiXhosa, Sesotho, isiZulu, Sepedi, Setswana, isiNdebele, Siswati, TshiVenda and XiTsonga, struggle with the change of language to English medium education in grade 4, after having been taught in these named languages from grades 1 to 3. They arrive in grade 4 as emergent bilinguals still developing language and literacy competences in these languages. English, which is sometimes the third or fourth language to these children, becomes another or additional language for them from grade 1, even though they already speak other African languages or varieties. These children, who are also the majority of South African children, struggle with meaning-making from an early age, disproportionately affecting their entire education and career. Language injustices are embedded within these complex processes.

I too have experienced struggles with meaning-making akin to these children. I grew up in a village, Umhlanga in Lady Frere, in the rural Eastern Cape where isiXhosa is the dominant language. I attended school at St Augustines Junior Secondary School and St James Senior Secondary School in Cofimvaba. We encountered English at school from grade 4 to grade 12. The expectation was for us to be taught in English, communicate in English and be assessed in English. We struggled to do so, because we had not yet developed English proficiency by grade 4 when we were expected to function like English monolinguals.

In my experience as a student, and now as a teacher-educator, it is the teachers who try to pick up where the institutions otherwise fail. Teachers throughout my schooling experiences would translanguage to provide us with epistemic access. They used linguistic resources that they have in their repertoires to communicate and make learning meaningful. Inspired by them, I now continue in their footsteps.

Learning materials in African languages are essential for supporting bilingual learners. This is why I have translated Stephen and Lucy Hawking's book titled, *George's secret key to the universe*, using African language terminologies. For example:

umwonyo – black hole
emajukujukwini – space
amasuntswana – particles
isiphekepheke – spaceship
isibonisikude/itheleskopu – telescope
isinqumlasangqa/idayametha – diametre
intshakatsholo/ikhomethi – comet

Such word lists and grammatical terminologies have become the norm for teaching practice; however, many teachers do not consider them as legitimate. Instead, they view them as 'smuggling in' the vernaculars of our curriculum (Probyn 2009). This is influenced by a Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) that requires them to teach in English from grade 4 onwards. The curriculum and the ideologies in circular connection with it are all in contradiction with the promotion of multilingual education across the national written language-in-education policy (commencing in 1997).[/vc_column_text][vc_single_image image="2600″ img_size="large" add_caption="yes" alignment="center" css_animation="fadeIn" css=""][vc_column_text css=""]There is a vast amount of research in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics that reveals multilingualism as the norm for the global majority. In South Africa, with its multilingual majority and multilingual constitution, there is no reason for these continuing tensions between Anglonormative and monolingual language ideologies held by teachers and the curriculum on one side and multilingual students and language policy on the other. Yet, such ideologies are persistent and set within systems of knowledge created through apartheid, as well as British and Dutch colonisation.

Teachers must be overt in resisting these ideologies and reshaping language practice as policy. In multilingual contexts, communication is hybrid, with people drawing from so-called mother tongues and English, and several linguistic resources in their repertoires. Part of my support of these repertoires (and resistance of ideologies) has included drawing on the concept of third spaces, which are 'hybrid' or 'in-between' space.

Here, learners are positioned in school as multilinguals, with programmes that calibrate education to their needs rather than as mother tongue speakers of African languages or English.

The concept of third spaces is explored in my recent chapter 'Decoloniality in South African Language Policy: Resisting Marginalisation of African Language Speaking Children' (2022) which I discussed with the *Reading Decoloniality* reading group. Following Flores and Garcia (2013), I view third spaces as a way to demonstrate to people that multilingual communicators do not have their languages set up in a binary in their minds and that our positioning of multilinguals as monolinguals isn't helpful for our education system. Established third spaces legitimise multilingual communication (Garcia and Li Wei 2014) as opposed to adaptive third spaces that only allow multilingual communication to support 'a struggling learner' but then encourage reversion to English.

Third spaces are necessary for non-binary work and inclusive education that works productively with diversity. As a teacher-educator, they have provided me with a starting point to the decolonial work I am currently involved in.

This is not light work and involves policy creation, pedagogical design and practice delivery. It involves working across and communicating with multiple publics, all with their own agenda. It is, however, healing: I advocate for the same translanguaging practices that my own teachers drew on to educate me.

My research into policy and systemic change means that I draw on pedagogical translanguaging as a planned, structured, deliberate and legitimate way for use of languages that privilege all students.

Header photo: Umhlanga in Lady Frere, the village Xolisa was raised

Photo: Xolisa Guzula with her translated book[/vc_column_text][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true" css=""]Date: 5th June 2024
Title: Decoloniality in South African Language Policy: Resisting

Marginalisation of African Language Speaking Children with Xolisa Guzula
Speaker: Xolisa Guzula
Chair: Asanda Ngoasheng
Minutes by: María Jose Recalde-Vela[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title=”Selected minutes” css=””]**Xolisa:**

> Depending on where the colonisation happened in Africa, the colonial languages were imposed on the African language speaking people. So, it is important to think about how that coloniality and that colonisation has made Africans feel that everything about them is inferior, including their languages and knowledges.

> Afrikaans became dominant and so African language speakers were forced to either learn English or Afrikaans, and African languages were marginalised and kept as ‘languages of the home’. And so, when children go to school, they must leave their home languages out of the school to come into their classrooms. So, we still experience that form of post-apartheid.
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> Neville Alexander had been a struggle veteran. He had been arrested and taken to Robben Island like Nelson Mandela. He was a teacher, and he had his PhD already when he was arrested, so he had come back to set up this institute to challenge the monolingual education system, but also not just monolingual but also European with Eurocentric approach in the way that African learners were being taught.
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> From last year July, there’s been work that has been done by colleagues who’ve worked with me before, who happened to be at the Department of Basic Education, who are pushing for transformation and for decolonisation… Well, it’s, it’s a decolonial language policy, but it was never implemented because people were uncomfortable with that. I think English benefits some people, you know, especially English-speaking people who write textbooks, who write the curriculums, who

train teachers. So, you can see that there's been marginalisation of African language speaking people in books and in the teaching at universities. There hasn't been a lot of black African language speaking academics at the institutions of higher learning.

The discussion is not about should we or should we not. The discussion is we are doing it, we are doing the transformation, and we are going to decolonise education. So today and yesterday I've been here in Johannesburg, and we've been working on issues of developing teaching materials. Issues of looking at how we can implement this, what it would look like look like, etc. So, there is move now towards that.

Reactions are not always positive. Even black people have responded quite negatively, which I think goes back to our conversation about which the ways in which colonialism is internalised and colonial thinking is internalised and almost normalised, even when people have the opportunity to be decolonised. Colonialism ended, but colonial thinking still happens. You know, the assumption that African languages are not good enough to be used in institutions of higher learning and to be studied.

People are weary of the rise of ethnicism. Ethnicity was constructed, and people can kill one another, we know about genocide. Because language is so tied to identity, if the political leaders speak a particular language, it's so easy for them to weaponise that language, to otherise others. People were weary of having to learn one language. But why not open up languages and let people choose what languages they would want to learn at university?

The work that I have been doing in the community has been to show that this doesn't consider how people will use language in

their everyday life. So, by participating in reading clubs, forming reading clubs, and creating communities; working with children and observing how they use language and how the adults also use language around them. For me, that has been a central place to challenge the monolingual orientation.

We often talk about these spaces as un-inclusive. How come there was no sign language? There is sign language now, in bigger conversations, on television. There much wasn't catering for people who spoke languages other than English. So, there was a call for interpretive services in the different languages. There I still think there is a lot of work that needs to be done, working with sign language, and for instance migrants. In Cape Town there are a lot of migrant children. So, if we talk locally about marginalised African languages, we also run the risk of marginalising the languages of other children who speak languages other than South African languages, but which are African languages, or who speak French. It has been a challenge to get the department to understand that we are still excluding if we do not address the needs of migrant children.

Reader:

For me, I think there is a need to reflect over, to move from third spaces. I think pragmatically I understand what you are doing, and it is a very powerful illustration. Not about what decoloniality can mean, but as an analytical concept. I think we need to move from third spaces to decolonial spaces.

Reader:

She called for getting children who speak English or Afrikaans to become multilingual. That is the 'normal' of the majority of the world, that has been marginalised. So that would be getting

everyone to become multilingual.

Xolisa:

There needs to be an incremental introduction of African languages. This includes introducing them for the English schools and Afrikaans schools that have never had these languages available to the English and Afrikaans speakers. What that means, now also including African languages in those schools, is that it is not only for the black bodies. It is for everyone, and the goal is to make sure all children learn their languages.

It is interesting seeing the pluriverse coming together. In the work of decoloniality, there are some scholars who think decolonisation is putting in African languages and doing away with everything else. Doing away with English and putting African languages ahead of English. That is another issue we are having to deal with, to get them to see that we do not need to marginalise, we need to bring everything together. And we do not need to think about universals, because then this becomes colonial thinking. When we are trying to decolonise, there are other concepts I am interested in exploring in the work of decolonisation.

Reader:

Multilingualism is the mother tongue of the majority peoples of the world.

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