

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

## Challenges of Mother-tongue Education in IsiZulu: A Case Study of Selected Schools in uThungulu District of Kwazulu-Natal

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### Abstract

*The post-apartheid language policy of South Africa grants every child the right to study in their mother tongue. Despite this provision, mother-tongue education in indigenous languages has only been implemented in some schools in the country, and this has also been limited to the first three grades of primary education. While research has highlighted the challenges of mother-tongue education in South Africa, little attention has been given to the educators' perceptions on the subject. It is for this reason that this study sought to investigate educators' perspectives on the challenges of mother-tongue education in uThungulu District of KwaZulu-Natal. Using Biesta and Tedder's ecological agency as a theoretical lens, the study adopted a multiple-case study research design to collect data from 30 educators in five schools using questionnaires. The results revealed that the implementation of mother-tongue instruction in uThungulu District was fraught with challenges such as ill-adapted terminology for mother-tongue teaching, negative attitudes from the community, lack of training for teaching in the mother tongue and lack of resources. The study is significant in shedding light on the role that educators as agents of the system can play in bringing about the successful implementation of mother-tongue education in South Africa.*

**Keywords:** IsiZulu; mother-tongue education challenges; uThungulu District; teacher agency

### Introduction

Research has revealed that children learn best when their mother tongue is used as the primary medium of instruction (Churr, 2013; Gobana, 2014). According to Gobana (2014: 50) "The mother tongue is the language with which children construct their knowledge, skills and experiences from their community". This definition underscores the importance for children to learn in their mother tongue because it is the language that they speak and understand best. Gobana (2014: 51) further argues that "in order to conceptualise content of the subject matter, in the first place, children have to understand the language of instruction". It is for this reason that the researchers of this study argue that children should be taught in a language that they master the most as the three-year policy in South Africa stipulates. The benefits of mother-tongue education are obvious in the sense that children enjoy school more, they learn faster and better, their self-esteem increases and there is more parental participation in helping the children at home. This implies that other than the cognitive and psychological benefits of mother-tongue instruction, it also has social benefits for the learner.

Despite the benefits of mother-tongue education, South Africa's history of colonialism and apartheid led to English and Afrikaans being retained as the media of instruction throughout the country. This meant that the majority of learners whose mother tongues were not any of these two languages were compelled to study in a second or second additional language. With the dawn of democracy, South Africa's Constitution sought to redress the injustices of the apartheid era by recognising 11 languages as official languages (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). This provision led to the adoption of the Language-in-Education Policy in 1997, which afforded all learners the right to receive education in their mother tongue (Department of Education, 1997). In line with this policy, indigenous languages were introduced as media of instruction in the foundation phase of schooling. This meant that "in Grades 1 and 2, all learners learn in the mother tongue, one that is approved as an official

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language and from Grade 3, a first additional language is introduced in addition to the language of instruction” (Stein, 2017).

Given these developments, one would have hoped for changes in terms of the use of indigenous languages in South African schools. Instead, mother-tongue education is still fraught with challenges such as language attitudes, unavailability of resources, language diversity, curriculum development among others, which is evidence that mother-tongue education is still far from being a reality (Stoop, 2017). While much research has underscored the importance as well as the challenges associated with mother-tongue education, there seems to be little attention on the perception of educators on the challenges of implementing the policy. It was for this reason that the researchers of this study sought to investigate the perceptions of educators on the subject, as the researchers argue that educators are in a better position to understand what works or does not work in the classroom. It is within this context that the study adopted the ecological approach to teacher agency (Biesta and Tedder 2006) so as to understand the perspectives of educators as agents of language policy implementation in South African schools.

The South African Constitution stipulates that everyone has the right to receive education in the official language of their choice in public educational institutions where education in that language is reasonably practicable (The Constitution, Section 29(2)). In line with the national language policy, each province in South Africa has adopted a language policy following the provisions of Sections 6, 9, 29, 31 and 32 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996). For this study, the researchers looked at KwaZulu-Natal’s provincial language policy which recognizes isiZulu, English, isiXhosa, Afrikaans as the province’s main official languages (KZN Provincial Language Policy, 2015). These are therefore the languages that the provincial government uses for official communication, and languages from which learners are supposed to choose their preferred language of instruction. However, section 6.2 of the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) gives the school governing bodies the power to determine the languages to be used in schools. This takes away the freedom of the learners to choose the language of education for themselves and gives this right to the school governing bodies. This means that learners are not exactly exercising this right as the decision is made for them by the schools. The inclusive nature of the South African language policy and the language-in-education policy are clear indications that the South African government recognises the importance of promoting African languages and providing education in the learners’ home languages. It is in this regard that Wright (2012) has argued that South Africa’s post-apartheid language-in-education policy is among the best in the world. It is however unfortunate that this policy is only good in writing as research shows that the implementation of the policy has not been successful, with most South Africans still preferring their children to be educated in English (Stoop, 2017).

This study adopted Biesta and Tedder’s ecological approach to teacher agency as the theoretical framework. This was motivated by the fact that teachers deal with the micro-level implementation of policies and are therefore better placed to experience the challenges inherent in the policies. According to Sang (2020:2), “Teacher agency refers to the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of education quality”. In the same light, Biesta et al. (2015: 624) see teacher agency as the teacher’s active contribution in shaping their work and its conditions –for the overall quality of education.” This means that teacher agency is the teachers’ ability to decide how to teach in order to achieve their pedagogical goals. The agency of teachers is conditioned by the contingencies of contexts in which teachers act upon their beliefs and values, and the attributes they mobilize in relation to a particular situation (Sang 2020:1). The ecological view therefore situates teacher agency within the contexts that teachers find themselves in, and this is where they make decisions that best suit their particular ecologies. This is significant in the current study because the researchers argue that teachers do not abdicate teaching challenges; rather they devise strategies with which to overcome the said challenges. The ability of a teacher to manifest agency is dependent on an interplay of contextual factors such as individual efforts, available resources as well as structural factors. In other words, each environment and each teacher are different from the other and the teacher makes decisions on how to teach depending on factors such as their own individual beliefs and knowledge, the resources available to them and other contextual factors. It is for this reason that the ecological view of agency is an important lens with which to study the abilities of teachers and constraints shaped by specific environmental factors (Parker, 2016). The environment is therefore an important factor which determines what teachers can and cannot do in their respective ecologies.

In the context of this study, this implies that the decisions that these educators make are influenced by their experiences in teaching in a rural environment, the resources at their disposal and the influence of the community

in a rural setting. This indicates that the specific environment in which a teacher works influences the nature and extent of the agency that the teacher can exert on his or her practice. These researchers adopted this theory because it is an important framework which can shed light on the role of educators in the implementation of mother-tongue education, and the challenges involved with the implementation of the said policy. This is significant because teachers are the ones who know what happens in class and whether it is possible to implement mother-tongue education in a certain environment. They are therefore in a better position to understand the challenges involved in the implementation of the said policy.

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research deals with the study of social phenomena through the collection and interpretation of non-numerical data (Crossman 2020:1). This means that qualitative research studies the social life of a particular group. In this study, the targeted group were foundation phase educators who used the mother tongue as a medium of instruction. The researchers adopted the qualitative approach with the intention of finding out what educators thought about mother-tongue education, its implementation and the inherent challenges. A multiple-case study method was adopted for the study. According to Gustafsson (2017: 1), a multiple-case study is used when a study includes more than one single case to understand the differences and the similarities between the cases and to analyse the data both within each situation and across situations. In this case, the researcher investigates more than one institution or individual and then analyses the data from within and across situations or institutions. The researchers of this study chose a multiple-case study because five different schools were the target of the study. Another reason was that a multiple-case study provides trustworthiness in research especially if the researcher is expecting similar or contrasting results from the different cases. The researchers were therefore able to analyse the findings of each school individually and compare them to findings from other schools.

Purposive sampling was used in the study to recruit 30 foundation phase educators from the selected schools as participants. The use of purposive sampling ensured that data was collected from participants who were experienced in the field and therefore had the answers to the questions presented to them. This was because they were teachers of the foundation phase where the mother tongue served as the medium of instruction. Data was then collected from the selected participants through the use of a questionnaire which consisted of close-ended and open-ended questions. The inclusion of open-ended questions was to allow the research participants to talk about mother-tongue education in their own words, free of the constraints imposed by fixed-response questions. In this way, the participants were able to add their opinions rather than just answering the posed questions, and this enabled the researchers to gather more information.

## Findings of the Study

The researchers asked the participants whether there were challenges in the implementation of the mother-tongue education policy and all the participants agreed that they were facing challenges. The challenges identified by the participants included the problem of terminology, the negative attitude of the community, the lack of training and the lack of adequate resources.

### ***Ill-adapted terminology for mother-tongue teaching***

The main challenge that the participants of this study mentioned was language development. The educators complained about the level of isiZulu that teacher guides and textbooks were written in. One participant indicated that:

*“The isiZulu that we teach these children is not the same as normal, everyday isiZulu that they will use at home, which makes school a totally different environment and it makes the job harder for us because you still have to translate the content into normal, modern isiZulu”.*

Another participant said that isiZulu did not have enough vocabulary for instructions, so they were obliged to resort to English or use borrowed words for learners to understand because the standard written forms of isiZulu did not fully accommodate teaching and learning.

Other educators indicated that the textbooks in isiZulu contained words that were mostly used a long time ago, and learners did not understand them. In this regard, one participant said that:

*“The isiZulu terms used in textbooks are not the usual words that children are used to, I feel that it is like learning the language all over again, even for me as a teacher.”* In the same light, another participant indicated that *“Lack of appropriate terms is a problem because the words that are used are not everyday conversation words, it is just dictionary isiZulu, which confuses the children”*.

The above responses are a clear indication that language developers are out of touch with the speech communities of these indigenous languages, which is why such problems occur in the classroom.

To overcome the linguistic challenges of teaching in isiZulu, the participants indicated that they often resort to code-switching between English and isiZulu to facilitate understanding. A participant indicated that:

*“The most common challenge is terminology. There are not enough isiZulu words to teach all subjects smoothly, we always have to code-switch”*.

What this implies is that due to the absence of some terms in isiZulu, teachers had to make use of English words to make sure that learners understand the content, especially for mathematics and technology subjects.

### **Negative attitudes from the community**

Participants also indicated that the attitudes of members of the community towards mother-tongue education was another challenge that was hindering the successful implementation of the policy. All the participants indicated that the rural community was not in favor of the policy. They mentioned that society had no confidence in the future of African languages when it came to learners' progress in life. They noted that learners needed a good command of the English language because it was a universal language that would open success doors for them. One participant indicated that:

*“Society does not value mother-tongue education. They prefer English because they believe it guarantees a better future for their children”*.

The participants' responses give a clear indication that parents in the rural areas were still attached to the idea of English being superior to African languages. The participants attributed the negative attitudes of parents to the society's lack of awareness of the proven benefits of mother-tongue education, as members of the community still did not consider indigenous languages valuable enough for high-function settings such as education, the economy and technology.

### **Lack of training for teaching in the mother tongue**

The importance of teacher training for teaching in the mother tongue cannot be stressed enough. Training provides teachers with the skills necessary to overcome challenges in the classroom and ensure that learners receive quality education. The researchers asked participants if they received training for teaching in the mother tongue. All of them indicated that they did not get sufficient training in their colleges and universities when it came to teaching in the mother tongue. They mentioned that they were trained to teach home languages as a subject but not to use an African language as a medium of instruction. In this regard, a participant said:

*“We are trained to teach home languages as subjects and not how to use these languages as languages of instruction, that part you figure out yourself.”* Another participant added that, *“Teachers do not get trained to use their mother tongue to teach. There is no module that teaches how to use mother tongue for every subject”*.

The lack of training makes it challenging for educators to effectively teach in the mother tongue. As a result, they exercise their agency by coming up with their own strategies to ensure that learners understand the subject matter.

### **Lack of resources**

The participants also indicated in their responses that lack of resources was a major impediment to mother-tongue education. According one of the participants:

*“The school caters for most of the children in our village and we usually have a large number of students in each class but the textbooks we have are not enough for all children. This means that they have to share these books”*.

This response highlights the problem of lack of resources in South African schools and its impact on the quality of education that learners are receiving.

## Discussion

A major finding of this study was that all the participants confirmed that the implementation of mother-tongue education in uThungulu District was fraught with challenges. This finding confirmed what previous studies had revealed, which is that the current mother-tongue education policy in South Africa looks good on paper, but its implementation has been met with challenges (Foley, 2015; Stoop, 2017). Educators who took part in this study identified challenges such as language development, language attitudes in the society, teacher training for teaching in the mother-tongue and lack of resources.

Regarding the development of indigenous languages for use as media of instruction, the study found out that there were serious problems of ill-adapted subject-specific terminology. The participants of the study revealed that the language used in the textbooks was old and traditional, which was different from the isiZulu spoken by the wider community. This was confusing to the learners and forced the teachers to use modern words that were easy for learners to understand. Cekiso *et al.* (2019) conducted a similar study on isiXhosa as a medium of instruction at foundation phase and found that teachers who used material written in isiXhosa complained that the vocabulary used was not user friendly to learners. They described it as old, deep and traditional as compared to the modern isiXhosa that is mixed with words from other languages. This is also a reality for the isiZulu language. Words that are used in textbooks are unfamiliar to the children and to teachers as well. Using both English and isiZulu in the classroom is likely to confuse the learners, given the fact that they are not yet proficient in the English language at this stage. It is worth mentioning that the standard forms of most African languages were developed in many cases by 19th century European missionaries (Krause, 2018 cited in Sibanda, 2019), and there is need for these languages to be constantly modernised to reflect modern language varieties spoken in communities. Foley (2015: 1) has also argued that the standard written forms of the nine indigenous official languages as they exist cannot fully function as languages of teaching and learning and should therefore be modernised, regularised, codified and elaborated.

Similarly, Turner and Koopman (2018) have asserted that the development of subject-specific terminologies in indigenous languages is important if these languages have to function as media of instruction. It is in this regard that insufficient or unfamiliar terminology has been identified as a major obstacle to the redress of past linguistic injustices in South Africa (Keet and Barbour, 2014). It is therefore not surprising that the participants of this study admitted to having a major challenge when it comes to teaching in isiZulu, because there were not enough subject-specific terms for them to effectively teach in the language, which compelled them to resort to code-switching and translation in order to facilitate the lessons. PanSALB has the mandate to develop terminology for the intellectualisation of South African indigenous languages. There are also other institutions involved in the development of terminology in indigenous languages (Khumalo, 2017). There is however little effort to coordinate these terminology projects so as to harmonise the final product, which leads to different terms being developed for the same concepts. The researchers believe that this is counterproductive as it may lead to different schools using different terminologies for the same concepts in the same language. It is therefore important that PanSALB as a government institution monitors all terminology projects in the country so as to be able to harmonise the terminology that is developed for the intellectualisation of indigenous languages.

The use of code-switching, which is the alternate use of two languages or two varieties of the same language in one conversation, to resolve linguistic challenges during teaching in the mother tongue is also significant as it underscores the agency of educators in the classroom. Participants also indicated that translation of lesson content was another strategy that they used to overcome linguistic challenges in the classroom. While it is important to note that the teachers are not qualified translators and their actions may lead to poor translation which may adversely affect the quality of learning, their actions also highlight the importance of teacher agency in mother-tongue education. In other words, when faced with a teaching problem that is peculiar to a specific socio-cultural context, teachers initiate strategies, which are not contained in the mainstream teaching strategies, to solve the problem. It is this phenomenon that Biesta and Tedder (2006) refer to as ecological agency, given that the teacher's agency is a result of contextual factors which are peculiar to his or her environment of practice. These are problems that policy stakeholders may not be aware of because they do not deal with the challenging task of day-to-day implementation of the policy. It is for this very reason that the researchers argue for the inclusion of educators during policy making processes to ensure that they come up with effective strategies to address these challenges.

Another challenge in the implementation of mother-tongue education that was revealed by this study was the language attitudes in the community when it came to their own language. The study found that most people in uThungulu District still regarded isiZulu as inferior to English and they did not believe that it could be used for education, business and the economy. This is in line with what some studies have revealed. Mohohlwane (2020:1) asserts that when asked in the South African Social Attitudes Survey which language should be the main language of instruction in the first three years of school, respondents have increasingly favored English, which is a problem for the provision of mother-tongue education because the government cannot force the public to take what they do not want. The parents in the community therefore preferred their children to be taught in English and those who could afford to take their children to English-medium schools were doing so, leaving only the children of the very poor to attend schools like the ones used in this study, where the children would be taught in isiZulu at the foundation phase. Although studies have shown that a good command of the mother-tongue allows for better acquisition of a second language, society is still worried that mother-tongue education in African languages would mean that learners get less exposure to the language which would propel them further in life. This is in line with Awung and Makhubu's (2016:9) argument that the dominance of English in the South African economic sector has led to the belief that fluency in the language is a guarantor of economic success. Similarly, Crystal (2003 cited in Reilly, 2019:2) contends that:

*“Mother tongues and local languages are often viewed as having value as languages of cultural identity whereas international languages such as English are perceived as being valuable for social and economic mobility”.*

This is quite concerning because the responsibility of choosing a language of teaching and learning in a school belongs to the School Governing Body, the same body which is made up of parents and educators of that school. If parents are sceptical of the success of mother-tongue education, there is a likelihood that their scepticism would influence the actions of the School Governing Body when it comes to language policy matters. It is the view of these researchers that negative attitudes towards African languages remain a major obstacle to their development as intellectual languages in South Africa. Years of colonialism and apartheid did not only lead to the relegation of African languages to insignificance but also resulted in the dominance of English and Afrikaans on the educational, administrative and economic spheres (Awung and Makhubu, 2016). It is for this reason that many black South African parents still believe that English is the only key to success for their children in the education and economic sectors.

The researchers also argue that the negative attitudes towards indigenous languages are compounded by the fact that learners that use African languages as media of instruction in the foundation phase do not receive the same quality of education as those in English-medium schools because the former are less resourced than the latter. This does not help in building trust in mother-tongue education in indigenous languages as the community tends to associate the lower quality of education received in the schools with the language used to teach the learners. The researchers of this study therefore argue that necessary measures need to be taken to educate the black community about the potential educational and economic benefits of acquiring knowledge in one's mother tongue. For this to be successful, the government needs to put the necessary resources in place to guarantee quality education in African languages. This would instil belief in the benefits of learning in indigenous languages and increase the attraction of these languages as instruments of educational and economic advancement.

This study also found that the training of teachers was another obstacle to the implementation of mother-tongue education in uThungulu District. The teachers revealed that their training did not prepare them to teach in African languages. They were trained on how to teach languages as subjects but not how to use them as languages of teaching and learning. This is in line with Foley's (2015) observation that “the problem is not with teachers of African languages but rather the ability to teach all subjects in African languages”. The lack of sufficient teacher training for teaching in the mother tongue has serious implications for the end goal of this policy, which is to provide quality education for all. It means that there is a shortage of skilled teachers in the education system, which results in poor quality education for black learners in the country. This is a serious problem because teachers need the necessary training for the success of mother-tongue education in African languages. This would also help them to avoid using alternative methods when teaching because they would be trained on how to handle and overcome challenges they face when teaching. The researchers therefore recommend that the Department of Education should work with tertiary institutions that train teachers to ensure that academic programmes are developed for the training of teachers to teach using African languages as media of instruction.

For a country that is battling with equal education, teacher training needs to be taken seriously, especially considering that black South Africans were marginalized and thus received poor quality education during the apartheid era. This resulted in lack of skills among the majority in black communities. Lack of skills often results in unemployment or employment in low-paying jobs, thus plunging black communities into poverty and worsening existing economic inequalities. A lack of quality education means that the next generation will be further plunged into poverty and frustration because they will not understand why their education cannot work for them in their fight to alleviate poverty. The study also found out that there were hardly any workshops to continuously develop or renew the capacities of teachers to use isiZulu as a medium of instruction. This is also a problem because knowledge is continuously evolving and so are teaching methodologies. If teachers are not given the opportunities to be abreast with the latest developments in their field of practice, they would not be able to use the appropriate content and methodologies to effectively teach in indigenous languages. The Department of Education therefore needs to do more in the training of foundation phase teachers for the successful implementation of mother-tongue education.

This study also revealed that teachers were confronted with the challenge of not having enough resources, especially textbooks, for teaching in isiZulu. This resulted in learners having to share the few textbooks available, and this had implications on how and when learners could use the textbooks. Hartley (2016:1) asserts that the shortage of books for learners in South African school is a cause for concern as this affects the learners' ability to study at home. Learning is an ongoing process which means that learners also need to study when they get home, and this is something that they cannot do if they have to share books. The government therefore needs to do more to ensure that learners who are studying in their mother tongue do not get an inferior education when compared to their counterparts who study in English.

## Conclusion

This study was aimed at investigating the challenges of mother-tongue education in uThungulu District of KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. The study was motivated by the fact that even though several studies have underscored the importance of mother-tongue education, the implementation of such a policy in South Africa still leaves much to be desired. It is for this reason that the researchers saw it fit to investigate what could be hindering the progress of the policy in rural KwaZulu-Natal. The findings revealed that the implementation of mother-tongue education was fraught with challenges, such as language development, insufficient training of educators, lack of resources and the negative attitude of the immediate community. Based on the findings, the researchers contend that despite the benefits of mother-tongue education as proven by research, the South African government still has a lot to do for the policy to be successfully implemented in the country.

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