Welcome to a bumper issue of LEAPnews, our last for 2008.

Our main focus is on a symposium on mother-tongue-based bilingual education that took place in a rural part of South Africa’s Eastern Cape province in October. Entitled “Ulwimi Iwenkobe ngundoqo and then bilingualism”, the symposium was hosted by Project ABLE (Additive Bi-Lingual Education) and the Eastern Cape Department of Education. It centred on Sosebenza Community School, an amalgam of farm schools near Tarkastad managed by the Winterberg School Trust.

Uluvo lomhleli

Wamkelekile kwihlelo lokugqibela leLEAPnews ka2008.

Eli hlelo ligxile kwisymposium ebingemfundo eng-geelwimi ezimbini esekelwe kulwimi Iwenkobe, iMother Tongue Based Bilingual Education nebibilwe kwelinwe lamaphandle oMzantsi Afrika, kwiPhendo lasaMpuza Koloni kweyeDwarha, Okthobha. Le Symposium esihloko sayo sithi, “Ulwimi Iwenkobe ngundoqo and then bilingualism”, ibisingathwe ngabeProject ABLE (Additive Bi-lingual Education) kunye neSebe lezeMfundo leMpuza Koloni. Le symposium ibigxile kwisikolo sasekuhlaneni iSosebenza Community School, isikolo eso esiyingthlangan-
Opinion

African languages at school? No, we can

Recent international studies advocate mother-tongue education within multilingual systems. In the light of these, governments in sub-Saharan Africa are bound to have some genuine questions when amending and realising their language-in-education policies. But they are also likely to encounter some red herrings. In this the second instalment, Peter Plüddemann entertains a debate on language medium and language-as-a-subject between Red Herring (Red) and Green Light (Green).

"Yes, but there are too many languages"

Red: Is mother-tongue education (MTE) really compatible with the increasing multilinguality of Africa's cities? While sub-Saharan Africa is still predominantly rural (60%), the continent is urbanizing at a steady rate as people from all over are drawn to the cities in search of work and a better life. Why should we even want to provide MTE to all these different language groups?

Green: The first issue is whether MTE is desirable or not. My position is that education based on the mother tongue must remain the goal - because it is learner-centred and therefore pedagogically sound; lays the foundation for all other learning, including that of additional languages; consolidates the socio-cultural core of the child's identity; is politically affirming of dominated groups; and is ultimately cost-effective economically. In short, the principle of MTE is non-negotiable. If MTE is beyond question for children in the political North, it should go without saying that it is the answer for children in the political South also. If we don't believe this our minds are (neo-)colonised.

If we accept the need for MTE, the issue becomes which languages to choose for MTE. This has to be answered politically - in nation-building terms - as well as economically, from a feasibility point of view. These choices become pertinent in countries in which literally hundreds of smaller languages are spoken (Nigeria, Cameroon, Tanzania), in addition to a few national languages which may or may not have official character. The most progressive choices have been made by countries such as Ethiopia that have begun to realise a mother-tongue based policy that promotes trilingualism, on a regional basis: mother tongue + lingua franca + international language.

The guiding principle should be to use the learner's mother tongue as the formative medium for as long as possible, with the lingua franca or the international language phased in as the supportive medium where so desired. We could call this scaffolded dual-medium education.

In the longer term, there may well be a reduction in the number of languages required for MTE in the cities of sub-Saharan Africa. This is because urbanization brings language contact, language shift, and even language death. To survive economically and cope socially, people are forced to learn a language that has currency, which in many cases will be an indigenous language of wider communication, or lingua franca. Over a generation or two, this LF may come to replace the original mother tongue, a process that is already underway in, for example, Addis Ababa (with Amharic), Dar-es-Salaam (Kiswahili), some Nigerian and Cameroonian cities (Pidgin English), and in Gauteng (isiXhosa). In this sense the indigenous lingua franca rather than the international language represents the bigger threat to the survival of local languages, especially smaller ones. We might ask whether it should be the task of the education system to spearhead the attempt to rescue moribund mother tongues. That is a debate for another day!

In the meantime, the educational use of linguae francae that already have writing systems and a public print environment can contribute to solving the language planning conundrum, particularly in urban schools. For millions of children in Africa's cities, including recent migrants and refugees, the closest they will come to MTE is lingua-franca education.

"Yes, but why should we learn African languages?"

Red: Speakers of African languages in sub-Saharan Africa today often complain about having to take their MT as a subject; they don't see the need for it since they "already know" the language. Meanwhile, very few MT
speakers of the metropolitan languages are interested in learning African languages as additional language subjects. All of this suggests that the teaching of African languages is in a crisis. Should we not just drop African languages as subjects altogether?

**Green:** No, that would be a mistake. There are two main reasons why learners are not keen on African languages. The first has to do with their low status in relation to English (or French or Portuguese) in the linguistic market today. If you don’t see environmental print in your region’s main African language, and you don’t need to know it to access higher education, communication technology, and the world of work, why indeed would you bother learning it? Here the challenge is to increase the presence in the print media of African languages, and to create economic incentives for knowing an African language well, such as making it a requirement for graduating from school or university, or landing a civil service job. This is not a new idea, and people in South Africa are finally beginning to accept the need for it. And when being able to speak, read and write in a language brings economic benefits, complaints about “already knowing” the language as a reason for not wanting to learn it formally will simply fall away. After all, how many mother-tongue speakers of English complain about having to do English at school?

The second reason is that the subject is often taught unimaginatively and with paltry reading resources, at both home-language and additional-language levels. We have to be honest with ourselves. Teachers of African languages at school and at teacher training institutions have mostly not had access to the kinds of books and training methods in African languages that teachers of English (or French) have enjoyed. As a result, many teach in the way they themselves were taught, using grammar-based teaching methods that emphasise structure, system, “traditional” culture and classical literature at the expense of communicative approaches, situated literacies, contemporary texts and youth cultures. And many of our teachers do not get around to doing much leisure reading themselves, especially not of novels, partly as a result of administrative overload. As a result, they cannot be good reading role models for our young people.

Some of the solutions would seem to be obvious. To facilitate cross-fertilization of ideas, train teachers of the different languages together in the most modern methods, and enable them to do joint lesson planning. In regard to literacy teaching, reading-to-learn and genre-based approaches appear to hold much promise. Devolve some of the resources that have been used for English, to African languages. For example, how many DVDs do we have of setwork plays in African languages, and how many novels? And we really should use our musical interest more to enrich language teaching – there are plenty of popular artists all over Africa today who sing in African languages. Thirdly, structure time during African-language periods for teachers and learners to read for enjoyment. Fourthly, start a national reading campaign in African languages aimed at teachers, and encourage book clubs amongst teachers.

The challenge is to raise the profile and increase the resource base of African languages in society, to improve their teaching, and to enhance the culture of reading. Can we make African languages appear cool to our youth? No, we can.

- In imaginary conversation with Neville Alexander, Michael Joseph and Esther Ramani, Salikoko Mufwene, Vuyo Nomlomo, and many more.
- Feel free to comment on this opinion piece, or to send in your own. Contributions should ideally be between 600 and 1200 words.

---

Photograph: Paired reading at Sosebenza: A Grade 8 boy doing paired reading with a Grade 2 girl, using a book he had written and made himself. The book was based on stories about life in the Winterberg during the 1940s and 50s related by a visiting storyteller, an older community member who was grandmother to a family at the school. (Photo and caption: George Hunt. See also pp. 15–28.)