

LANGUAGE POLICY AND PLANNING IN BOTSWANA

Leonard B M Nkosana
University of Botswana

Abstract

This paper explores language planning and policy in Botswana and discusses how they are used as tools of political and economic control. It also discusses the fact that English has been allocated the very important role of being the language of education and Setswana the role of national language while the other local languages in the country have no official roles at all. It further examines the case for mother tongue education in education in Africa in general and in Botswana in particular and argues that it should be implemented with great care so that it does not result in further marginalisation of African countries.

Introduction

According to Weinstein (1990) language planning often involves the designation of a language or languages by the ruling elite, in an effort to mobilise large groups of people in support of their idea of political independence. Language planning according to him, also assists the ruling elite in their effort to consolidate diverse territories and peoples into a community; to facilitate a sense of belonging or to challenge definitions of belonging to a community; to expand or to contract frontiers; or to change qualifications for winning or influencing power, earning money, and achieving respect.

In Botswana as in most other sub-Saharan African countries, the ruling elite has used English as the power tool of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment/economic, or social position and Setswana as a tool for national unity. Adegbija (1994:18) describes the emergence of a ruling elite based on proficiency in the ex-colonial language in sub-Saharan Africa (including Botswana) in the following terms:

“As a consequence, an elite class, demarcated from the non-elite class principally on the basis of competence in the ex-colonial language, has emerged”

He argues that this western oriented elite class controls, shapes, and virtually creates the economic and political destinies of most countries of sub-Saharan Africa, since it holds the key to power. The political power it wields, Adegbija (1994) perceptively contends, is partly acquired due to competence in the European language.

Language Planning in Botswana

In Botswana, the Language Council is the body that is charged with the responsibility of all language planning matters. This body, which recommends policy to the government and over-sees its implementation, is dominated by the ruling elite (Nyathi-Ramahobo, 1999). If one uses Weinstein's (1990) analysis, the ruling elite in Botswana could be said to have used language planning to expand frontiers (in Botswana this may not be literal but educational, social and economical), or to change qualification for winning or influencing power, earning money, and achieving respect. In Botswana as in many other Sub-Saharan African countries, English, ex-colonial language, has been allocated that role as the official language and the language of education. Proficiency in English expands one's frontiers. First as the official language it is the language of business in government and semi-governmental institutions and also in private companies and NGOs. Therefore proficiency in the language improves one's prospects of getting employment in these institutions. Secondly, English, the

language of education, gives students who are proficient in it an advantage over those who are not. It should be noted that although the public schools are supposed to be English medium from standard two (grade two), in practice this is not really the case. The level of proficiency is too low for instruction to be done successfully in the language. English, especially in primary schools, might be used in the delivery of lessons (though with a lot of code-switching) but all other communication would still be in Setswana (Arthur, 1994, 1997, 1998). This is to some extent the case even in secondary public schools. English for most of the students, especially in the rural areas, is simply a classroom language and not the language of ordinary communication in the schools.

Arthur (1994) comments that the kind of discourse used for informative purposes by pupils and teachers in primary schools is modelled on the written rather than the spoken mode and characteristically consists of grammatically well-formed sentences. This is what usually happens in situations where the language is learned under formal classroom settings with no life demonstration as to how the language is used in real life communication. This is particularly true in rural areas where there are fewer chances of meeting speakers of English.

The situation is completely different in private primary and secondary schools where the language that is used for any kind of communication is strictly English. Also the teachers tend to be people whose mother tongue is English or people who are not speakers of Setswana (Bagwasi, 2003). Moreover the rich and the ruling elite, realising that a good proficiency in English gives their children an advantage in education, even go to the extent of using English as the medium of communication in their homes instead of any of the local languages. This then tends to give the children of the elite who attend these English medium schools an upper as far as educational success is concerned and getting employment after completing school. This is because English is used in so many public, private and educational domains. Lastly, in Botswana, as in other former Anglophone countries such as Kenya, education is associated with a good competency in the English language, therefore those who are good at the language are respected as educated people and exercise a great deal of influence in the society compared to those who are not proficient in it (Bunyi, 2005).

Setswana, the only recognised local language, though it has been designated the national language as the language spoken by the majority of people, has been allocated limited official roles. It is not developed for use as a medium of instruction beyond lower primary and should it be declared the medium of instruction a lot of work would need to be done to make it cope. The other local languages are not even recognised by the ruling elite and so they have not been developed at all. Some, such as many San languages don't even have orthographies that have been developed to facilitate their writing, let alone written grammars. The situation described above clearly shows that English dominates the linguistic market in Botswana by being the language of education, government, business and the judiciary.

Solution to the Dominance of English

One might be tempted to think that the solution to this problem is to stop using English as an official language and designate one or more of the local languages as the official language/s. This approach is not without its pitfalls. Pennycook (1994) contends that because of the intricate involvement of English in former British African colonies such as Botswana, in the political, educational, economical and social lives of the countries, which in turn are also connected to the global political, educational, economical and social life, it

would not be easy or practical for these countries to resist its power or dispense with it. In Botswana and Kenya, for example, English is tied up the capitalist systems of the countries, whose successes depend on foreign investment, which entails a dependence on the English language for its success.

Pennycook (1994) further asserts that the different roles of English and Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania should be understood with reference to both their colonial pasts and to the different educational and development policies in the two countries. In Tanzania, Swahili became widely used as a national and official language due to Nyerere's insistence on 'Education and Self-Reliance', a policy which emphasised the need for each stage of schooling to be complete in itself and to prepare Tanzanians in the socialist development of the country. However, since the country started moving away from socialist policies and adopting more capitalist policies and since the retirement and subsequent death of Nyerere, English has been regaining more importance in education, especially in secondary and tertiary institutions (Rubagumya, 1994). In Kenya, by contrast, English is more widely used and enjoys greater prestige, largely because Kenya's capitalist system, whose success depends on foreign investment, creates a situation for dependence on the English language (Pennycook, 1994).

It has been argued that resistance to the imposition of a former colonial language on former colonies had its negative effects. Pennycook (1994:17) contends that while one effect of Muslim resistance to the imposition of European languages in North Africa, such as French or English, was the preservation of a stronger sense of religious and linguistic cohesion, "this also led to a degree of isolation and their slowness in gaining power after independence while English or French-speaking African elites gained ascendancy". He also gives the example of Malaysia, where under British colonial rule, the Malays were able to maintain their language, culture and religion but found themselves excluded from social and economic power within the country.

The Tanzanian example also illustrates how difficult it is to resist the power of English for long. In 1967 Kiswahili was made the sole medium of instruction at primary school level. This switch was welcomed in the country and was strengthened by the nationalist and socialist discourses that the ruling elite spread through the "emotionally highly charged political tracts and rhetoric on the Tanzanian resolve to build socialism and self-reliance" (Rubagumya, 1994:7). Rubagumya (1994) further reports that in the five-year development plan (1969-1974) it was projected that Kiswahili would be used higher up at secondary school level. The Presidential Commission on Education (1982) recommended a gradual shift of the medium of instruction to begin in secondary schools in 1985 and to be completed by the year 1992 at tertiary level. However, even though, according to Rubagumya (1994), the commission was made up of educationists of unquestionable academic and professional credentials, the ruling party elite did not accept the recommendation. They instead argued that English would be the medium of education at post-primary levels though the teaching of Kiswahili as a subject would be strengthened. Rubagumya (1994) contends that the change in the attitudes towards the use of English in the society has been attributed to liberalisation of the economy and a shift from socialist discourses and rhetoric to market-oriented management of the economy and a view of development as a technical process in principle. According to Pennycook (1994) the power of English in the world has made it impossible for a country like Tanzania to maintain policies favouring Kiswahili over English, and just as countries such as China and Malaysia reverted to more pro-English policies in the 1980s, so Tanzania, as has already been pointed out, has also been obliged to reconsider its

stance.

What seems to be important at the moment is for Botswana to develop its undeveloped linguistic resources (other local languages) without neglecting the already developed ones (English and to some extent Setswana). It would be unwise for Botswana to go the way of Tanzania by declaring one of the local languages the official and language of education (as previously mentioned, Tanzania has since revised that policy especially with regard to Swahili as the language of education).

Botswana cannot therefore, small as it is, and like Kenya depending on foreign investment for the growth of its economy; hope to succeed in resisting the power of English. The best option is to spread English education to as many students as possible to stop English from continuing to be used as the power tool of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions. In fact the power of English to open doors of further education or employment is unlikely to continue for very long in Botswana. This is because as the government's policy of ten years of universal education starts to bear fruit, mere knowledge of English will no longer be enough to open one's doors to full participation in both the economic and political life of the country.

It is important to note that education in Botswana is accessible and free to every child up to form three (year ten) and since English is taught as a subject from standard one (grade one) and becomes the medium of instruction from at the latest standard five (grade five), by form three (year ten) the majority of students are operationally or functionally proficient in the language. However, because the policy of ten years of universal education is fairly new, having been first achieved in 1994, English proficiency will continue to be a distributor of power for sometime. It is hoped that as many people become proficient in the language due to the policy of universal education English proficiency will cease to be rare and therefore the power tool of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions. The solution to the dominance of English should be discussed together with mother tongue education.

Mother-tongue Education

Another important issue that the Language Council and Education policy planners should tackle is that of mother tongue education. Bourdieu (1991) has argued that the development of a language is commensurate with the demands made upon it by the linguistic market. Education is one of those markets that can help revive or strengthen a language. This section therefore discusses mother tongue education in the light of the belief that this would help strengthen and revive local African languages and also the belief that students tend to learn best when taught in their mother tongue. It argues that while research has shown that in Botswana English medium education may be a problem for primary school pupils (Arthur, 1994, 1998) mother tongue education beyond primary school may lead to the further marginalization of the country in the light of the global hegemony of English already discussed above.

In many African countries, at primary school level or during the first years of primary school, mother-tongue education is the norm, followed by second language education, mostly an ex-colonial language like English, French, or Portuguese (Bamgbose, 1991). With regard to South Africa, Heugh (2003) argues that mother tongue education should be implemented in South Africa as students tend to learn best when taught in their mother tongue. She argues

that despite the inequitable intent of Bantu education (Bantu Education was intended to give Africans an education that made them docile servants of white South Africans), the school leaving pass rates of African language speaking pupils steadily increased after its introduction, with eight years of mother-tongue education. She further contends that after a revolt against Bantu education in 1976, the change from mother tongue to second language medium (mostly English) was brought back to the fifth year of school. She goes on to argue that instead of pass rates improving, as many parents expected, they began a downward trend. Though the value of mother-tongue education cannot be denied, it is rather simplistic to blame the downward trend of pass rates after 1976 in former apartheid South Africa, solely on the bringing back of mother-tongue education from the eighth year of school to the fifth year.

After the student revolt of June 16, 1976, the educational climate in South Africa never really stabilised for normal educational activities to continue. Chick (1996:34) claims that the uprising “spread to the rest of the country, almost assuming the proportions of a full-scale civil war”. Chick (1996) also maintains that the Bantu education system made it a point that most of the teachers in the home-lands like Kwa-Zulu, did not speak English with confidence or fluency, used outmoded materials, and had almost no contact with English speakers. She also makes the point that following the shift to English as medium in primary from the fifth year onwards, no changes were made to the syllabus for English to prepare the ground linguistically and conceptually for its use across the curriculum. As a result black primary school students were not adequately prepared for the sudden transition to English after the fourth year of schooling concurrently with the broadening of the curriculum to ten subjects.

She further argues that the English competence required for reading content subject text books in the fourth and fifth years of schooling, was far beyond the English competence that might have been expected from a student who had optimally benefited from English as a second language teaching materials then used in junior primary schools. Because of this situation, Chick (1996) argues, teachers tended to resort to providing notes that the students were required to memorise. He further asserts that in 1989, while 100% of teachers in schools for whites were professionally trained, in the sense that in addition to having at least matriculation or higher academic qualifications, they also possessed teachers’ certificates or diplomas, only 20% of teachers in black primary schools and 10% in black secondary schools were professionally qualified. Therefore, in view of the above points raised by Chick (1996) many factors beside the language one may have contributed to the downward trend of pass rates after 1976.

In Botswana, Arthur (1994) who studied classroom interaction in standard 6 (grade 6), the second year after the introduction of English as the medium of instruction found that teachers also used outmoded teaching methods that included the same rhythmic chorusing prompts and responses also found by Chick (1996) in South Africa, by Brock-Utne (2005) and by Bunyi (2005) in Kenya. She maintains that the limited roles played by English at societal level in the country were paralleled in the classroom by a limited functional range in which English is only used for instructional purposes. English is only used for the delivery of the lesson which were heavily teacher-centred and not for ordinary communication in the classroom. She asserts that the consequences of the limited range of English use in the society are reflected in an instructional style in which formulaic memorisation plays a central part. Arthur (1994) concludes that the policy of English medium from standard six (usually standard five) is a handicap to teachers and pupils in their pursuit of meaningful learning.

However, it is interesting to note that primary school teachers actually support English medium education despite the fact that many of them find it a challenge to teach in it. Arthur (1997) reports the findings of a survey with Botswana primary teachers in which they were found to support English medium on account of both its symbolic role as the language of educational achievement and its practical role in the national examination system. The teachers' attitudes towards English medium education reflect the sociolinguistic status of English in Botswana, in which it is considered a marker of social mobility and a language of power. The present English medium education policy is also informed by it. This was clearly demonstrated when a Presidential Commission on Education consulted with people around the country on educational policy between 1992 and 1994. One of the public's popular demands was that public primary schools be turned into full English medium schools like private schools. Though not fully embracing this demand the government changed the policy and brought forward the introduction of English as a medium of instruction from standard 5 to standard 2 (Government of Botswana, 1997).

While it is true the practice of English medium education in the last three years of primary school is a problem, especially in the rural areas where exposure to English beside the classroom is minimum, the main handicap is not necessarily the policy but the instructional styles of the teachers, which might be due to the poor qualifications and training of the teachers. In the private primary schools where the teachers are well trained, though English medium education begins at standard one, the pupils cope with it. In Botswana primary schools there are still many teachers (17.3% according to Ministry of Education 1994 Education statistics) who are untrained (Government of Botswana, 1997). There are also significant number of teachers whose highest academic qualification is only the primary school leaving certificate and a two year Teachers Certificate ((Government of Botswana, 1997). The highest academic qualification of the majority of primary school teachers is only form three (year 10) with PTC as their highest professional qualification. Such teachers' English competence is likely to be inadequate.

However, in the secondary school system teachers' educational level and professional qualifications are much higher than those of their primary counterparts. At junior secondary level the lowest academic qualification is form five (year twelve) and the lowest professional qualification is a three year teachers' diploma after form five. There are also many teachers at junior secondary school who hold bachelors degrees plus post graduate certificates and/or diplomas in education (Government of Botswana, 2003). At senior secondary level the lowest academic qualification is a bachelor's degree and almost all the teachers also have post graduate certificates or diplomas in education. Many senior secondary school teachers also have master's degrees in education (Government of Botswana, 2003).

It should be noted that the official policy indicates that English medium education begins at grade two in primary school (Government of Botswana, 1997). However in practice anecdotal evidence indicate that teachers continue to follow the old policy of English medium education from grade five onwards because it was more realistic than the present one. In view of the above there is no compelling reason for a radical or change of the present practice of four years of mother tongue education. A slight increase of mother tongue education by one year to make it five years would suffice. This will give the pupils a little more time to acquire more English from their ESL class before they switch to English medium education. As has already been mentioned extending English proficiency to as many people as possible in Botswana is likely to stop it from being used by the elite as the power tool of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions.

It should be noted that English medium education has a number of advantages in third world countries. First English opens up vast amounts of knowledge written in the English language. Crystal (1997:220) referring to the status of English as a global language asserts that “access to the emerging global language-widely perceived as a language of opportunity-needs to be guaranteed.” It is important to note that this goal is close to being realised in Botswana in the sense that access to education (and to English because it is taught as a subject from standard one to form five and as a medium of education from standard five onwards) is almost 100% and free from standard one (grade one) to form three (year 10).

The less than 10% who still do not go to school do not do so due to economic reasons but cultural ones. For instance, some children of hunter/gatherer communities do not go to school due to their mobile life styles. In Botswana by form three (year ten), which is ten years of learning English, a learner is able to communicate in English. This is important because in Botswana since 1994, unlike in the rest of Africa access to English is extended to every child, not just to the children of the ruling elite (Government of Botswana, 1997).

Pakir (1999:104) describes the importance of English as a global language in the following terms:

English is a global vehicle that refuels at every stop, creates economic and other opportunities, and returns to its home bases, each time upping the financial ante for English users. English has become a global commodity that seems to have no sell-by date attached to it.

Pakir (1999) further contends that the fact that English is the main language of the Internet has globalised it even more. She perceptively argues that small countries like Singapore and Brunei have little choice, but to connect or plug into the international grid of business and finance. Botswana is in the same position as these small countries, and at the moment the country is in the process of establishing itself as an International Financial Service Centre (IFSC) in Southern Africa (Government of Botswana, 1997). This project could not be easily accomplished without the use of English as the medium of communication in business in Botswana. The country with its small population of about 1.7 million is too small to be inward looking when it comes to the language of education and wider communication, especially at secondary and higher levels.

Conclusion

A policy that combines both mother tongue education at lower and mid primary levels and English medium education from upper primary upwards would be the wiser choice considering the status of English as a global language, which would serve the country well by connecting it to the rest of Africa and the rest of the world. The policy should recognise that Botswana is a multilingual country and the government should commit itself to the development and teaching of all its local languages as subjects in the schools. In other words a new language policy is needed that considers the multilingual nature of the country as a positive feature and not as a problematic situation. The policy should consider the various languages of the country as resources to be exploited for the benefit of the country as a whole and not as sources of problems, as seems to be the case now.

References

- Adegbija, E. (1994). *Language attitudes in sub-Saharan Africa*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Arthur, J. (1994). English in Botswana primary classrooms: Functions and constraints. In C. M. Rubagumya (Ed.). *Teaching and researching language in African classrooms*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Arthur, J. (1997). 'There must be something undiscovered which prevents us from doing our work well': Botswana primary teachers' views on educational language policy. *Language and Education*, 11(4), 225-241.
- Arthur, J. (1998). Institutional practices and cultural construction of primary school teaching in Botswana. *Comparative Education*, 34(3), 313-326.
- Bagwasi, M., M. (2003). The functional distribution of Setswana and English in Botswana. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 16(2), 212-217.
- Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the nation: The language question in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Brock-Utne, B. (2005). Language-in-education policies and practices in Africa with a special focus on Tanzania and South Africa-Insights from research in progress. In Lin, A.M.Y & P. W. Martin. (Eds.). *Decolonisation, globalisation: Language-in- Education policy and practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Bunyi, G. W. (2005). Language classroom practices in Kenya. In Lin, A.M.Y & P. W. Martin (Eds.). *Decolonisation, globalisation: Language-in-Education policy and practice*. (pp 131-152). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Chick, K. (1996). Safe-talk: Collusion in apartheid education. In H. Coleman (Ed.). *Society and the language classroom*. (pp 21-39). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Government of Botswana. (1997). *National Development Plan 8 1997/98-2002/03*. Gaborone: Ministry of Finance and Development.
- Government of Botswana. (2003). *National development plan 9, 2003/04-2008/09*. Gaborone, Botswana: Government Printers,.
- Heugh, K. (2003). *Language policy and democracy in South Africa*. Centre for Research on Bilingualism, Stockholm University: Stockholm University Press.
- Nyathi-Ramahobo. (1999). *National language: A resource or a problem?* Gaborone: Pula Press.
- Pakir, A. (1999). Connecting With English in the Context of Internalisation. *TESOL QUARTERLY*, 33(1).
- Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London: Longman.
- Rubagumya, C. M. (1994). *Teaching and researching language in African classrooms*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Weinstein, B. (1990). Language policy and political development: An overview. In B. Weinstein (Ed.). *Language policy and political development* (pp 1-22). Norwood: Ablex.

Dr. Leonard B M Nkosana
University of Botswana
Communication and Study Skills Unit
Private Bag 0022 Gaborone
Telephone: (+267) 3552915
Fax: (+267) 390884
E-mail: nkosanal@mopipi.ub.bw