

The use of mother tongue in public services in Namibia: A short thinking piece

F.E.M.K. Senkoro
University of Namibia

&

Liswani Simasiku
University of Namibia

1.0 The Use of Mother Tongue in Education

1.1 Background, Issues and Steps

The history of policies that include the use of mother tongue in public services in Namibia goes back to as far as the period immediately after Independence. Among such policy documents is Chapter 1 Article 3 of *The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia* that deals specifically with Language. In this article English is declared to be the official language of Namibia. It is further stated in Sub-Article (2) that:

Nothing contained in this Constitution shall prohibit the use of any other language as a medium of instruction in private schools or in schools financed or subsidized by the State, subject to compliance with such requirements as may be imposed by law, to ensure proficiency in the official language, or for pedagogic reasons.

As early as March 1990, when the process of reviewing the language policy for schools was initiated, Namibia then recognized the need for a new language policy for schools so as “to promote mother tongue use, alongside English, in schools and colleges of education.” It was in a document called *The Language Policy for Schools: 1992-1996 and Beyond* that the issue of languages in Namibia was elaborated on. However, since the document did not explicitly outline the use of national languages, including mother tongues, in schools, there were many inconsistencies in carrying out the language policy. Due to misinterpretation and manipulation, some policy implementers mainly preferred teaching through English

rather than through the mother tongue. Formerly disadvantaged learners were further marginalized in this process, as non-English speaking teachers were expected to teach through the medium of English. Any teaching approach, including the learner-centered approach to teaching advocated by the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, cannot be easily realized if teachers and learners lack the necessary language skills and proficiency

A draft policy was developed following discussions that were held in all regions of the country. Subsequently, the approved policy was issued in the document titled *Education and Culture in Namibia: The Way Forward to 1996 in 1991*. More than 10 years later, in January 2003, another important document, *The Language Policy for Schools in Namibia: Discussion Document* was produced by the Ministry of Basic education, Sport and Culture. This policy document was guided by six criteria, viz.:

- The expectation that a language policy should facilitate the realization of the substantive goals of education.
- The equality of all national languages regardless of the number of speakers or the level of development of a particular language.
- The cost of implementing the policy.
- The fact that language is a means of transmitting culture and cultural identity.
- The fact that for pedagogical reasons it is ideal for learners to study through their mother tongue, particularly in the early years of schooling when basic skills of reading, writing and concept formation are acquired.
- The need for learners to be proficient enough in English, the official language, at the end of the seven-year primary school cycle in order to gain access to further education as well as to a language of wider communication.

Subsequent and consequent to these noble criteria different opinions were made and practices were put in place. For the most part, the medium of instruction from Grade 1-4 was and continues to be in Namibian mother tongues. The idea had been to gradually widen the coverage to higher levels. Alongside this development, more than 25 years later, English has continued to be used as the medium of instruction at all levels of education after Grade 4. This has not been

without consequences. Three principal viewpoints on this issue emerged. One side argues that it is unfair to continue with this policy since only fewer than 2% of Namibians speak English as their home language, whereas 98% of teachers are not fluent in English and that, if anything, the policy has not only contributed significantly to the education crisis, but it has destroyed a generation of Namibian youth. This is so since one cannot expect English language to be used “as a means of transmitting culture and cultural identity” to the Namibian people as per criterion 4 above.

The second viewpoint argues that English is the language of international communication and, thus, not using it as the language of instruction in the education system will inevitably cut off the majority of Namibians from the international community of trade, diplomacy, and politics. Alongside this viewpoint are the most recent efforts by scholars to try to improve performance and fluency in English among students and teachers alike. These efforts are purported to correct the current situation whereby the standard of English in schools and tertiary institutions continues to deteriorate.

The third viewpoint is that indigenous languages should be developed, strengthened and intellectualized, through amongst other measures, coining of new, needed words/terminologies, standardization and harmonization of such languages.

2.0 The Status of Mother Tongue in Other Public Services in Namibia

2.1 Background, Issues and Steps

The third viewpoint mentioned above further argues that alongside the intellectualization efforts, the promotion of mother tongue use should not be limited to a policy on language in education that is effected nationwide, but also through a higher status of mother tongue/indigenous languages within every sector in Namibia, including such sensitive sectors like the judiciary in the health sector where communication between the population (including patients) and health sector personnel must be clearly made; and in the general administration of the country.

In a number of cases, such as in that of Human Rights Committee, Diergaardt et al. v. Namibia, Communication No. 760/1997 (CCPR/

C/69/D/760/1997), final views of 25th July, there are complaints that people are forced to use English during the proceedings in court although this is not their mother tongue, which, in turn, affects their right to a fair hearing. In Section 10.10 of the same case there are complaints that “the lack of language legislation in Namibia has had as a consequence that (people) have been denied the use of their mother tongue in administration, justice, education, and public life.” The same stance is spelled out in Section 11 of the same case that states the following:

The Human Rights Committee, acting under Article 5, paragraph 4, of the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is of the view that the facts before it disclose a violation of Article 26 of the Covenant.¹

This case is an example, among others, in which the language question in Namibia is actually tied closely to that of human rights. It is a human right for one to get education in the language that he/she understands well and a language to which such a learner can relate well culturally. It is equally a human right for one to follow and participate in court proceedings in one’s choice of language that will ensure a fair hearing. Such cases, when done through interpreters, as is the case now, do not necessarily ensure fair hearing, and may, more often than not, be in violation of the Constitution.

The above applies to such other sectors like the Health sector. A few questions can be asked here: How correct and effective is communication between a doctor and his/her patients that is conducted in English? If this involves an interpreter, as is so often the case even in the courts of law, how accurate is the translation? What are the competency levels of such interpreters? How effective are the public health campaigns that are done in English? How much do such campaigns successfully reach the intended audience, the majority of who do not understand English?

The above questions need to be answered when dealing with the place and status of mother tongue in public services in Namibia.

¹ De Schutter, Olivier, *International Human Rights Law: cases, Materials, Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.777

One way of answering them is through research that will involve opinions and suggestions from teachers/lecturers, students, education experts, parents, members of the judiciary, doctors, patients etc. so that a new Language Policy is developed, a policy that will take the views of all stakeholders into consideration. This will help in suggesting how mother tongue can be efficiently and effectively used in public service in Namibia. Fortunately this is in line with Chapter 1, Article 3 of the *Constitution of the Republic of Namibia* that states *inter alia*, that:

Nothing contained in Sub-Article (1) hereof shall preclude legislation by Parliament which permits the use of a language other than English for legislative, administrative and judicial purposes in regions or areas where such other language or languages are spoken by a substantial component of the population.

This implies that whatever research and steps are taken, they have been given a legal basis and relevance that can be even through the Parliament to ensure that the use of mother tongue in public sectors/ service is introduced and carried out effectively and efficiently.

Quick References

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