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One language among many: the role of English in the lives of youth today

English is the official language in 53 nations, with approximately 400 million people using it as their first language. The number of persons who speak English as a second language is much vaster, since English has for long been the global lingua franca in education, commerce and science. To state the obvious: English plays a vital role in our global society. But this dominant status hardly means it stands beyond the critical gaze.

Most countries consider their indigenous languages as a national asset; this is no different in South Africa. Bangeni and Kapp (2007), for example, talk about horizontal and vertical codes. Proficiency in English tends to allow for vertical (up and down) movement, signifying the potential for upward socio-economic manoeuvring. Our indigenous languages fall within the horizontal code and are an important signifier of social solidarity, identities and, a sense of belonging and community.

However, post-1994, education policies were among the first things that had to change in our move towards a more equal and democratic society. In the new democratic republic, everyone was (in theory) given an equal education. But the negative connotations of mother-tongue instruction (the legacy of apartheid's infamous Bantu Education) meant that changes were slow in coming. The investment in terms of the cost and time required to translate syllabi and develop African languages to academic standards – and the pressure to change the education system as soon as possible – meant that the retention of English as a language of learning and teaching was inevitable. Indeed, for a long time, English was shielded from its colonial history due to the history of apartheid (Smit, 1998; Silva, 1998; Kamwangamalu, 2007).

Today, English has an ambivalent place in the linguistic pantheon of our rainbow nation. It is the language of our colonial past, but is the preferred lingua franca, especially in education. This has a direct impact on our youth who are under immense pressure to become at least somewhat proficient in English in order to be successful at a tertiary education level. But, with only 9.6% of the country being English speakers, how fair is that pressure on our youth?

Recently, there has been a more intentional focus on multilingualism in the arenas of economics, politics and education. Glossaries of translated key terms in various academic fields are being developed, translanguaging (i.e. the use of difference languages together) is a popular theory being tested, and there has been an increase in the number of Masters and Doctoral theses written in a language other than English (and Afrikaans). Research into multilingualism has also shown that it '...expands what it is possible to imagine' and that '...languages provide rich insight into underlying processes that drive patterns of biodiversity (Trisos, Auerbach and Katti, 2021: 2). In other words, using multiple languages to express knowledge can enrich our understanding of the world around us.

Notwithstanding these shifts in the country (and globally), English as the educational lingua franca is here to remain for the foreseeable future. But what English are we teaching? Should we not be embracing a World Englishes approach to English development in South Africa? We should celebrate the emerging localised or indigenised varieties of English, and recognise those idiosyncratic features of South African English that make us so unique – think of “now now” as a uniquely South African temporality. Instead of viewing English as the language of the coloniser, could we not instead see it as a language that everyone owns and therefore has the right to use in the ways they choose? About half of the world's English speakers are second language speakers, according to estimates (Van der Walt et al., 2009:18), thus the idea of a ‘perfect’ British or American grammar and pronunciation belongs to a distant past. Focus is shifting towards more accessible and inclusive language – language that nurtures intercultural and international communication. This is an empowering change, especially when we consider that English now develops in parallel with other African languages, thus contributing to linguistic and cultural diversity. And, far from English being a transmitter of Anglo-cultural norms, the development of new varieties of English shows how the language can be adapted by its speakers to reflect their cultural norms. Our own South African English(es) are enriched by African idioms, proverbs and syntax.

So what does this mean for the youth of South Africa? With the educational landscape in mind, we should encourage the absorption of localised varieties of English into the educational space in order to enhance South African English(es). This may enable the youth of South Africa to start seeing themselves as linguistic actors who have agency and ownership. As Chinua Achebe once said: ‘for me there is no other choice. I have been given a language and I intend to use it because... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be new English’.

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