The Language-in-Education Policy in South Africa:

A gap between policy and efficacy

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Abstract—**Language in education policy plays a significant role in teaching and learning language, and thus it has been a major issue of research in language in education policy. South Africa is one of the countries that has become a center of discussion in language in education policy issues for its unique multicultural and historical account that are of a major influence in shaping the country's language in education policy as it is today. This article provides an account of the implementation of the language in education policy in South Africa particularly the extent to which the policy promote the native African languages, as the oppressed ones during the apartheid era, to be used in educational context. It sets forth the issues of historical and multilingual situation in South Africa, and against these backdrops the implementation of the language policy in education in South Africa is discussed. It was revealed that there was a gap between the policy and its efficacy. Prior to 1994 the official languages in South Africa is English and Afrikaans. While the majority of African speak the African languages, some other speak indigenous languages. After the demise of apartheid, the new government declared the 11 languages as the official language including *Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.* However, in effect English remain the dominant language although the language in education policy have enforced the Constitution to promote additive bilingualism and the use of learners' native language as a language of learning and teaching. In addition, the status of English an international language may attract parents to enroll their children to English language schools instead of African language school despite the fact that the majority of learners do not have sufficient English language proficiency to engage in the teaching and learning process.**

Keywords—language in education policy; apartheid era; bilingualism; African languages

I. INTRODUCTION

Language in education plays a significant role in teaching and learning language, and thus it has been a major issues of research in language in education policy worldwide. South Africa is one of the countries that has become a centre of discussion in language in education policy issues for its unique multicultural and historical account that contributes shaping the country's language in education policy as it is today. Like most African nations, South Africans are multilingual.

Initially Africans used various different languages. However, after the 1994 that marked the end of apartheid era and the birth of new democracy in South Africa, the authority

has made a decision to 11 languages to be the official languages in South Africa [1]. Those 11 languages include Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Sepedi, English, Setswana, Sesotho, Xitsonga, Swati, Tshivenda, and Ndebele. This decision certainly has a significant effect on altering native African language status and its speakers. In addition, it is also indicative of the struggle on preserving the idea of multilingualism in the country. However, in effect English remains the dominant language used in formal communication context.

Although multilingualism has been the country's language policy, several research have proven that the Constitution is not taken for granted in terms of its implementation and efficacy for communication in wider context. One of the issues that is interesting to discuss is how the language policy affects the language used in educational context. There is a gap between what is conceived in the Constitution and its implementation in real context. Language in education policy plays an important role in disseminating and implementing the policy including language used as medium of instruction, language taught in the classroom, and students' perception towards the implementation of the policy. This article is aimed at examining the implementation of the language in education policy in South Africa. The discussion will specifically caters topics including multilingual language policy in South Africa, Language in education policy, and factors that impede the implementation of the policy.

II. MULTILINGUAL LANGUAGE POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The multilingual language policy in South Africa can be traced back to the apartheid era from 1949-1994. In this era, the country was divided into several social groups, that is, White, Black, Colour, and Asian races. The apartheid politics also significantly affects the language use in specific to each segregated areas. This gives rise to English and Afrikaans as the dominant language used in the country. Although there are government effort to reconcile this situation, the changes of progress are still little in effect [2].

After the death of apartheid era, the South African government decided to form a new Constitution that intends to promote the local or native African Languages. The new Constitution states that:

'recognizing the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take

practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages' (The Constitution, 1996, Chapter 1, section 6 [2]).

The national government and provincial government by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably (Section 6 (4)).

The implication of the Constitution is that it gives rise to 11 native African languages to the country's official language. The 1991 census indicates each language with percentage distribution as presented in the Table 1 as follows:

TABLE I.   CENSUS OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES

	1996	2001
Afrikaans	14	13.3
English	9	8.2
(isi)Ndebele	1	1.6
(isi)Xhosa	18	17.6
(isi)Zulu	23	23.8
Sepedi (Northern Sotho)	9	9.4
(se)Sotho (South Sotho)	8	7.9
(see)Tswana	8	8.2
(si)Swati	3	2.7
(tshi)Venda	2	2.3
(xi)Tsonga	4	4.4
Other	1	0.5

Another move that marks the post-apartheid era is the establishment of Pan South African Language Board. This board is responsible to:

'Promote and create conditions for the development and use of these (African) and other languages' (The Constitution, 1996, Chapter I, section 6 [5a]).

Considering those Constitutions, many have been sceptical that those Constitutions will make several changes towards the nation multilingualism. It is, amongst others, caused by the ambiguities in terms of which official languages should be used in which province. As a result, English and Afrikaans remain the main official language as it was in the apartheid era. This unsatisfying result of the Constitution prompted the government to form another Constitution which state, amongst others:

- Promoting multilingualism so that South Africans will view multilingualism as a valuable resource;

- Bringing about an appreciation that, in a multilingual society, knowledge of more than one language is an asset both in an immediate economic sense and in the larger social sense;

- Breaking down the legacy of apartheid by means of the promotion of African languages.

- Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. (Section 29 (2)).

- Everyone has the right to use the language and participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights (Section 30).

The establishment of the Constitutions on language policy above marked the end of apartheid language policy, in which English and Afrikaans gained dominant language status. It also marked the beginning a new era for language policy in South Africa. The government is mandated by the Constitution to uphold the use and development of all the official language including the language oppressed during the apartheid era [3].

Although the PANSLAB Constitution approved for maintaining the native languages, there has been an idea of reducing the languages such as cutting off the special status of English, Afrikaans, Zulu, and Xhosa as the largest and most influential languages. Also there is an idea of changing the status of the Nguni languages of Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Ndebele into more of dialects, but nevertheless this idea was never established because of some of the regional and identity issues despite the fact that the language speakers are quite enthusiastic about this plan.

III. LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The language in education policy in South Africa is conceived in the Constitution with quite remarkably refer to the principles of language policy as discussed earlier. Generally it presents a broad statements on the mechanism of the ways the language policy is implemented in South Africa. The language in education policy is represented in the National Education Policy Act (Act 27 of 1996) that empowers the Minister of Education to determine a national policy for language in education. The policy mainly operates within the following ideas:

- In terms of the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the government, and thus the Department of Education, recognizes that our cultural diversity is a valuable national asset and hence is tasked, amongst other things, to promote multilingualism, the development of the official languages, and respect for all languages used in the country, including South African Sign Language and the languages referred to in the South African Constitution.

- The inherited language-in-education policy in South Africa has been fraught with tensions, contradictions and sensitivities, and underpinned by racial and linguistic discrimination. A number of these discriminatory policies have affected either the access of the learners to the education system or their success within it.

- The new language in education policy is conceived of as an integral and necessary aspect of the new government's strategy of building a non-racial nation in South Africa. It is meant to facilitate communication across the barriers of colour, language and region, while at the same time creating an environment in which

respect for languages other than one's own would be encouraged.

- This approach is in line with the fact that both societal and individual multilingualism are the global norm today, especially on the African continent. As such, it assumes that the learning of more than one language should be general practice and principle in our society. That is to say, being multilingual should be a defining characteristic of being South African. It is constructed also to counter any particularistic ethnic chauvinism or separatism through mutual understanding.

- A wide spectrum of opinions exists as to the locally viable approaches towards multilingual education, ranging from arguments in favour of the cognitive benefits and cost-effectiveness of teaching through one medium (home language) and learning additional language(s) as subjects, to those drawing on comparative international experience demonstrating that, under appropriate conditions, most learners benefit cognitively and emotionally from the type of structured bilingual education found in dual-medium (also known as two way immersion) programs. Whichever route is followed, the underlying principle is to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s). Hence, the Department's position that an additive approach to bilingualism is to be seen as the normal orientation of our language-in-education policy. With regard to the delivery system, policy will progressively be guided by the results of comparative research, both locally and internationally.

- The right to choose the language of learning and teaching is vested in the individual. This right has, however, to be exercised within the overall framework of the obligation on the education system to promote multilingualism.

Based on the statements of the language in education policy above, the main aims of the implementation of the policy includes:

- Promoting full participation in society and the economy through equitable and meaningful access to education;

- Pursuing the language policy most supportive of general conceptual growth amongst learners, and hence to establish additive multilingualism as an approach to language in education;

- Promote and develop all the official languages;

- Supporting the teaching and learning of all other languages required by learners or used by communities in South Africa, including languages used for religious purposes, languages which are important for international trade and communication, and South African Sign Language, as well as Alternative and Augmentative Communication;

- Counter disadvantages resulting from different kinds of mismatches between home languages and languages of learning and teaching;

- Developing programs for the redress of previously disadvantaged languages.

- Relative to the stated above includes the subsequent statements as follows:

- The parent exercises the language choice (the document uses the wording 'language rights') on behalf of the minor learner.

- Learners (i.e. their parents) must choose their language of teaching upon admission to a school.

- Where a certain language is not available, learners may request the provincial education department to make provision for instruction in the chosen language.

- Governing bodies of schools must stipulate how the school will promote multilingualism through using more than one language of learning and teaching, and/or by offering additional languages as fully-fledged subjects, and/or applying special immersion or language maintenance programs, or through other means approved by the head of the provincial education department.

- Where there are less than 40 requests in Grades 1 to 6, or less than 35 requests in Grades 7 to 12 for instruction in a language in a given grade not already offered by a school in a particular school district, the head of the provincial department of education will determine how the needs of those learners will be met, taking into account:

  1. The duty of the state and the right of the learners in terms of the Constitution, including

  2. The need to achieve equity,

  3. The need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices,

  4. Practicability, and

  5. The advice of the governing bodies and principals of the public schools concerned.

In line with the language in education stipulated above, the South African School Act (Act 84 of 1996) aims to provide a strong basis for the protection and improvement of the diversity of its language and cultures [4]. For teaching and learning practice, the Department of Education's language policy stated that students have rights to be taught in language they are interested in and they should make clear propositions of what language they wish to use when applying for admission. The language to be used in the classroom must be the official languages, that is, the 11 languages as stated in Constitution of country's language planning. The Constitution makes sure that pupils from grade 3 onwards will have to study the language they are taught in, and another optional approved language [5].

Although the government committed to the establishment of multilingual and the promotion of language rights in all aspects of public life, there seemed to be a drawback when it comes to education sector in South Africa. The 11 official languages are taught in school in terms of 'home language', 'first additional language', and 'second additional language'. In its implementation, very often learners assigns for 'home language', whereas the specific language is their second or third language. This is quite common in multilingual community and former White schools that have taken quite extensive African language students. This condition has become a serious concern for parents since they regard English as more important than their 'home language'. This is believed to be attributed to several reasons as follows:

- To secure their children's social and financial future because parents may consider English as International language.

- Parents believe that mastering proficient English is preferable in job market.

- Studies cannot completed at secondary and tertiary level in African language.

- There is a huge disparities amongst schools due to the apartheid in the past.

- Schools have different attitudes and motivation over African languages to be learnt at school.

During the era of apartheid, one of the prominent political acts is the Bantu Education Act in 1953. According to this act, each province is responsible for making decision or policy in education despite it often ends up in separating the groups of people. But, quite surprising is that indigenous education is promoted. Students are segregated into schools based on their home language or 'mother tongue' including English and Afrikaans. This regulation applies to the White communities (Dutch and British) as they were assigned for Afrikaans and English school, respectively. This condition has effect on the further multilingual existence in South Africa. On the one hand, it is noted that the native African language is improved due to extensive use of practice in the curricular setting. On the other hand, this seemingly beneficial effort to develop native African languages in fact exacerbates those native languages [6-8].

In post-apartheid era, the education system changed quite slightly including the language in education policy. In this new democracy era, the indigenous language became compulsory to be taught in formal school. The system of native language teaching remains the same as apartheid era, but the schools with indigenous native can choose what language they want to use in particular school [9-12]. This indirectly promoted the local indigenous language quite significantly since for the first few years they will use and learn using indigenous language in elementary level. After few years of using indigenous language, the schools encourages to change to either English or Afrikaans with additional second language. Likewise, schools in English community learn and use English as the first language, while another language serves as second language. In Afrikaans school, the language to be taught is Afrikaans, while

English is often taught secondarily. The implementation often seems quite unfair for the indigenous language schools. While indigenous language pupils may choose and learn English as their secondary language to be taught at schools, the English and Afrikaans schools do not consider indigenous native African languages as their secondary choice. This is quite clear that they have less interest in learning indigenous language.

Although African students learn native languages in their first few years, they mostly change to learn Afrikaans or English in their subsequent level of schools. This mostly happens to Afrikaans students who learn their native language without any enforcement to learn indigenous language [13,14]. Although it is mandated in the Constitution to introduce indigenous language in schools, the schools seems to have assumed the indigenous language to be less important and undervalued. One example is of the case of Zulu language, the most widely used language. With limited language and human resources, it is less possible to make it as language of instruction, let alone language of science and mathematics [3,15-18].

In several areas, many students just skipped their schooling time learning their indigenous language and jumped into learning English. This is caused by parents' perspective assuming that mastering English will be more beneficial than that of indigenous language. Many parents want to make sure their children have a better opportunity in their future social and career [19-22]. The prominent status of English as an international language provides learners with confidence of opportunities in globalized era [23]. Although indigenous language is used in education which constitutionally guarantees their existence, the extensive use of English which keeps growing has become threats to the indigenous language. However, recently, there is a move to lift the status of African languages by encouraging African students to use their native language in addition to English or Afrikaans.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article examines the language in education policy in South Africa specifically in terms of its implementation and the extent to which the language policy in education accommodates the multilingual South Africa. Prior to 1994 the official languages in South Africa is English and Afrikaans. While the majority of African speak the African languages, some other speak indigenous languages. After the demise of apartheid, the new government declared the 11 languages as the official language. Those include *Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.* This was seen as an effort to promote African languages which were oppressed in the past. However, in its implementation English remain as the dominant language although the language in education policy have enforced the Constitution to promote additive bilingualism and the use of learners' native language as a language of learning and teaching. This is quite an irony since the majority of learners do not have sufficient English language proficiency to engage in the teaching and learning process, including teachers' English language proficiency. The other factor that may exacerbate this condition is that parents want to secure their children's social and financial future because parents may

consider English as International language. Parents believe that mastering proficient English is preferable in job market.

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