

LANGUAGE PREFERENCES OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS WHO SPECIALISE IN ENGLISH AND AN AFRICAN LANGUAGE

Malefeu Maria Sigudla, Thembinkosi E Mabila & Happy Mathew Tirivangasi

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article was to provide the language preferences by the pre-service teachers who specialise in English and an African indigenous language for their future employment. The focus was mainly on whether those pre-service teachers would take unsubsidised English and subsidised African indigenous language specialisation. Different studies have investigated the contentious issue of language preference in education, particularly in South Africa. They report that African indigenous languages are insufficiently promoted despite the Constitution's requirement for equitable treatment of all 11 official languages. The South African Department of Education department intervened to promote the African indigenous languages and to increase the number of teachers for African indigenous languages in schools; through Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme. Language-in Education Policy (LiEP) was also put in place to promote various languages in unison. The available literature revealed a negative attitude towards the use of African languages. This results in a decline of the African indigenous languages; being unsupported, which poses a challenge particularly in rural areas. A qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews among pre-service language teachers and a purposive sampling was employed. The results showed that most of the participants preferred to teach African indigenous languages (i.e. Sepedi/Xitsonga/TshiVenda) while the rest 30% preferred to teach English. Their preference was founded on a different individual motivation (e.g. culture carrier; language as a legacy; maintain identity; language exploration etc.). It is hoped that the preferred African indigenous languages would enhance the chances that the afore-mentioned languages are supported beyond the schooling period. In conclusion, the study contributed a body of knowledge that the pre-service teachers shown interest in teaching African indigenous languages for their future employment. Further, the researchers can conclude that Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme is effective in curbing the lack of African indigenous language teachers because those languages were one of the scarce skills subjects in schools. A new body of knowledge was provided by this study that the pre-service teachers demonstrated interest in teaching African indigenous languages for their future employment. There is a need to investigate the sustainment of the African indigenous languages among new teachers in the teaching field.

Keywords: Language preference, Constitutional requirement, African Indigenous Languages, Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme, Pre-service language teachers.

INTRODUCTION

According to Kanana (2013), indigenous languages in the continent of Africa have been confined to only a few fewer formal areas of use such as locally held political rallies. This situation seems

to be true for the South African society as Thorpe (2002) reveals in a discussion paper that, there is still a tendency towards monolingualism in South Africa's public life. Hence, Thorpe (2002) bemoans this inclination which he says it results in linguistic inequality. Such a situation goes against stipulation in the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) (Section 6 (a) Act 108) stipulates; that all the eleven official languages need to be treated equitably. It has been established (Mabila, 2007; Makamu, 2009 and Kanana, 2013) that language preference is an issue not to be neglected or ignored. This is especially in South Africa where the history of language use is riddled with stereotypes, prejudice and negative attitudes towards speakers of indigenous African languages (Tsuda, 2013). Considering that language preferences change from time to time, this study sought to investigate the language preferences of pre-service language educators (namely, Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga). Those pre-service teachers were funded by Funza Lushaka Bursary source which required candidates to specialise in one of the indigenous languages offered in the teacher programme. Our main attention was paid on whether those participants would take unsubsidised English as well as subsidised African indigenous language specialisation (prefer one over the other hence they specialised in two languages: i. e. English plus African language). Perhaps the assumption of personal preference of a teacher for teaching one or the other language could impact on the learning of students.

However, the research participants stated their language preferences based on the individual motivation such as, among other things, sustaining culture; preserving identity; keeping the legacy; language exploration/ gaining of more knowledge for those who preferred to teach English for future employment. This article focused on the student language teachers in order to find out which language do they prefer and what are the reasons regarding their preferences for their future employment. In this regard, it addressed the following research questions: What are the student teachers' preferences about languages to teach when employed? What are the reasons for the student teachers' preferences regarding languages to teach when employed?

Understanding the student language teachers' preferences would provide a need for a future study for the teaching maintenance of African indigenous languages in schools by the language teachers.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to the adopted Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Section 6 (a) Act 108 of 1996), these languages: Afrikaans, English, isiZulu, Xhosa, Sepedi, Sesotho, TshiVenda, Tsonga, Setswana, isiNdebele and isiSwati are regarded official and they should enjoy parity of esteem and be treated equally (Republic of South Africa, 1996). It also requires every learner to be proficient in at least one African indigenous language in order to promote a multilingual society (Republic of South Africa, 1996). As a multilingual country, Language-in Education Policy was introduced in order to foster multilingualism in the education domain. However, the African indigenous languages are deemed as languages of no use or no value for education. Other significant difficulties are the low developmental status suffered by the African indigenous languages and the prediction of their inadequacy for the purposes of academic registers in various disciplines, particularly the sciences (Madiba, 2012). For example, parents, teachers and scholars as well, hold different views based on the use of these languages for academic purposes (Madiba, 2012). In

addition, it was found in a study to investigate unexamined early childhood bilingual education issues in Zimbabwe, where there is concern about poor performance by pupils in both first and second language arts, that pupils and parents preferred English as the language of instruction at infant level, regardless of facing challenges in accessing the curriculum through the use of the second language (Ndamba, 2008). Kanana (2013) clearly emphasised the lack of appreciation of the usage of African indigenous languages in education, due to the ability in a Western language (English) guaranteeing access to better jobs.

According to Chaka (1997), the preference of English undermines the government policy's promotion of equal opportunities in South Africa. Black students, particularly from rural areas with limited English language proficiency, are disadvantaged because they do not have the support structures to develop English language related skills and they also lack the maximum exposure to English (Tshotsho, 2013). The study focused on the language preferences of student language educators who specialised in English plus an African indigenous language, for their future employment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants and Sample

A total of ten participants, with equal gender consideration, were purposively selected for the study. All were student teachers in the School of Education, supported by the Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme, specialising in English plus one African language offered in the teacher programme (Sepedi, Xitsonga or Tshivenda). They were in the final year of study towards the Bachelor of Education in Senior Phase & Further Education and Training (B.Ed. SP&FET), which qualifies graduates to teach in the Senior Phase (Grades 7–9) and the FET (Grades 10–12). Their ages ranged between 20 and 40 years.

Research Design

A case study design was used to provide an in-depth understanding of a small-scale representative sample of the student language teachers and to provide broader interpretations of the case. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the method to generate data. The study focused on one group of participants sharing similar characteristics (specialising in English and an African language of choice) and sought to ascertain which two of their two specialisations they preferred. It also provided rich narrative reports of each of the participants' responses. It gave us the first-hand information from the participants' responses and stories around their language preferences that were required for answering our research questions.

Following Patton (1990), the purposive sampling we was suitable for the study because the participants had similar subject area of specialisations and the same funding source. Their specialisations in two subjects (English and an African indigenous language) meant that they were qualified and that they were to teach both in their future schools, but in this study we were concerned only about their preference for one specialisation language over the other. The interviews were guided by a set of questions (interview guide) designed to elicit responses

covering two main topics: the student's language preference for future teaching and reasons for that preference.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Two phases of semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants in the form of individual face-to-face encounters. The first phase was conducted with all the participants, using the interview guide to elicit responses. In addition, the researcher made brief notes about the interview setting. The student teachers were deliberately encouraged to elaborate and expand on their aspirations, explanations, feelings, and thoughts related to their language preference. Each interview lasted for approximately 60 minutes, depending on the responses of the participants. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for later interpretation and identification of gaps. Following gaps identification, appointments were made for a second phase of interviews conducted only with those respondents whose responses revealed information gaps. The same procedure was used for both sets of interviews, but the follow-up interviews were shorter because the purpose was to fill the identified gaps. Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was adopted to interpret the data. The researchers familiarised themselves with the information by listening to the tapes of the recorded interviews. Next stage was data transcription, and the analysis was done through identified the key themes and sub-themes and therefore interpret them in terms of how they answered the research questions for this study. They were identified because they emerged as the recurring key ideas from the interviews.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of the study are provided as follows: first, the language preferences of the pre-service teachers in respect of their future employment and, second, the themes and observations emerged from the interviews (Table 1). From a total of ten participants, three preferred to teach English, and three preferred to teach Xitsonga, while two each preferred TshiVenda and Sepedi. Overall, the language preferences showed that a total of seven participants had more interest in teaching an African indigenous language at their future schools, in contrast to three who preferred English. These findings demonstrate promising interest in teaching African indigenous languages by our group of pre-service language teachers. This interest supports what the African Association for Lexicography (AFRILEX) (2015) postulated, that a multilingual country such as South Africa needs to ensure the development and promotion of its indigenous languages to at least the level of English, as per section 6(a) Act 108 of the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), which stipulates that 'All official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equally'.

Second, three identified themes elicited observations made by the participants (table 1). Participants' preference of one language over the other was based on different individual feelings and attitudes. Several recurring ideas emerged, which assisted in providing the answer to our research questions.

Table 1: Themes and summary of observations

| THEMES | OBSERVATIONS MADE |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Language preference | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity about the English language • Inadequate knowledge of English • Fear of committing errors in English • Passion/lack of passion for one or other language specialisation |
| Teaching practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of confidence due to inadequate knowledge, commitment of errors • The effect of the specialist language preference on practice • Influence of dialect |
| Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A ‘vehicle’ for permanent employment • Imbalance of languages supported by the scheme • Improper school placement procedure • Financial stability during studies • Academic motivation • Method for addressing the shortage of African language teachers |

Source: Authors

Language Preference

The participants expressed their attitudes and feelings concerning the concept of language preference. Even though they strongly preferred one specialisation over the other, their preference was founded on different individual motivations. The participants who preferred English had the desire to explore and gain more insight into the language. One participant specialising in English and Sepedi mentioned that:

‘I’ve developed the love for English since I was in secondary school. Even when I meet a person, before I even know which language the person is speaking thus the first thing, I’m going to communicate with the person in English...’ (Participant 9).

Another participant who also preferred to teach English at his future school, proudly mentioned that it’s been a long time since he was using his mother tongue, which is Xitsonga. He explained his motive behind his preference of language that he would like to explore the English language and not necessarily that he loves it: *‘I’ve learned a lot about Xitsonga; so, I want to explore other languages as well’*. In addition, with English, he can make use of the Google search, and gather information that he is looking for, unlike with African indigenous languages, where he said: *‘...with African language they don’t really update information on time, so we tend to wait for those who are doing English to translate or interpret it into Xitsonga’*. He also perceived lack of modern resources in African indigenous languages as the utmost disadvantage for him to can prefer Xitsonga, hence the curriculum keeps on changing. Some, for example, preferred to teach their

indigenous language to preserve their culture from one generation to the next; some wanted to preserve their language as a legacy; some saw it to maintain identity. Some also pointed out that they had not received enough knowledge as they had expected to do, in their other specialisation area of English, and were concerned about having English language as their other area of specialisation. One participant who specialised in English and Xitsonga said:

English we usually write activities; assignments but they don't teach us or engage us in, properly. So, in English it's like we are only learning methodology not getting deep into content. So, I found this a bit difficult to teach English... (Participant 7).

This participant was worried about lack of competence to facilitate lessons in English. Another older participant was concerned about having been out of institution for learning for a decade: *'...I've been staying at home for ten years...'* Not all the student language teachers in the teacher programme had come to their studies straight out of Grade 12, and the participant expressed lack of confidence in teaching English and they also fear to commit errors in English. In addition, one participant mentioned that he had a passion for his mother tongue which was Sepedi, though preferred to teach English, he never thought that a mother tongue could be a subject to be studied further at an institution of higher learning, such as university and he took it for granted. *'...it was just that language, that language that I'll, I don't think I'll ever go to university to study for'*.

Teaching Practice

About four participants who preferred to teach indigenous language indicated that their lack of confidence and competence during teaching practice derived from lack of proficiency in English. One who specialised in Sepedi and English said *"...even in classroom situation, eh, I'll have no uncertainties whereby clever kids will say 'ma'am, did you say verb, eh, not a noun'.* One participant who specialised in Xitsonga and English, remarked that he felt inadequately equipped with knowledge of English, was concerned when a learner asked a question that he would not be able to answer during the lesson:

'So, I won't say I'm confident when I'm teaching it because I'm not yet fluent, so with Xitsonga I know almost everything...and in most cases it, it embarrasses me to say to a learner that eish! I go and research on that, I'm not familiar with that'. (Participant 2).

One of those who preferred English explained that, during teaching practice, she arranged to exchange periods with her colleague, so that she took all the English periods and the other took all the Sepedi ones. Lack of passion for Sepedi was the main reason that she preferred her other specialisation of English. About a quarter of the participants clearly indicated that they were afraid of committing errors in English when teaching during their teaching practice sessions, due to a lack of proficiency which in turn results in lack of confidence. One of those participants said:

'...when it comes to English lessons; there are some challenges maybe I'll be teaching then learners have to ask question, you find gone the question, the type of a question they're asking; I don't even know too'. One participant who also preferred English said: *'...so in English I sometimes have to*

study and understand it better, so that I can teach in class. And make sure that each question that a student might ask, I will, will answer... (Participant 5)

About three of the participants who preferred to teach their mother tongue rather than their other specialisation (English), indicated that their regional dialect influenced the way they spoke English. One participant whose mother tongue was Xitsonga admitted that he could be easily classified in a particular tribe because of his spoken English: *'Obvious. Somebody can hear that this is totally a mo-Xitsonga... They can say, ayi, this dialect, I am mo-Tsonga'*. However, emphasised that even though his Xitsonga regional dialect could not be perceived or detected when he spoke Tshivenda, he admitted that the effect was extreme when he spoke. One participant who specialised in Sepedi and English called her regional dialect 'Selobedu', which is classified under Sepedi, and admitted that she did not feel confident when she spoke English because of the influence of her mother tongue: *'Yes, it has influenced my English. It always influences it'*. She was convinced that one's accent strongly influenced the way she spoke English: *'...the way we pronounce English words'*. She added: *'...when I speak in English I just feel I'm not speaking the right words...'*

Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme and Future Employment

The research participants clearly saw the bursary scheme as a panacea, breaking the financial barriers to learning and serving also as academic motivation. About half of the participants emphasised their appreciation of having been enrolled in the teacher programme as a bursary holder because it provided certainty that they would obtain permanent employment upon completion of their degrees. One said:

'...upon completion you'll be placed. At the end you are assured that I'm going to work as a teacher, without the mentality that they are lots of teachers who have completed about 23 years and still without employment out there. It gives us a peace of mind that we'll be employed at least...'
(Participant 10).

Financial support and certain employment were also mentioned by a participant who specialised in Sepedi and English: *'...it helped on the fees and of course I'm not even confident about the job after, after my studies'*. Of a similar vein, a recent study by Gagnon and Lampron (2015) found that bursary recipients regard the bursary as a 'catalyst' for employment.

About a quarter of the participants anticipated that a challenge would arise if they were placed in a school where they would have to teach a subject in which they had not specialised. The Department of Education placed the new teachers at schools where there would be permanently employed. About half of the participants also affirmed that they were aware that one of the introductions of the bursary was to produce indigenous language teachers as one of the scarce skills in schools. Almost all the participants raised the point that there was no balance in the intake of languages offered in the teacher programme, in that more language students enrolled for Sepedi, less for Xitsonga and least for Tshivenda. The bursary was regarded to support the language students financially. Moreover, it also seemed that the bursary served to inspire the language students to work very hard in terms of their academic studies to avoid being taken out of the system

as confirmed by some of their expressions. One said: ‘...*financially I was really struggling. And then that was even hindering my progress in terms of, uh, performance in class; because of what to eat, what to do; but with Funza ... I’ll concentrate too much on academic work than on thinking what to eat...*’

DISCUSSION

The emerging themes from the study were discussed under this section:

What are The Student Teachers’ Preferences about Languages to Teach When Employed?

The overall findings showed that seven of the student language teachers preferred to teach African indigenous languages for their future employment. According to the findings, a future for such languages seems bright. Moreover, this is germane to the study findings done also at the institution of higher learning in University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) whereby it was found that students showed positive experiences of being taught in IsiZulu indigenous language because they learn much better than in second language (Nkosi, 2014). Notwithstanding their optimistic experiences in that study, those students showed that they do not prefer to be taught in IsiZulu (Nkosi, 2014). Unanimously, other studies (Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukoma, 1976; Toukoma & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1977) have also showed that children develop proficiency in second language should they possess proficiency in their first language.

An earlier study by Bourdieu (1991) showed that the student language teachers deemed their indigenous languages (apart from also being an official language in the country) as linguistic capital which brings about a symbolic power (for their future employment) to the as carriers. However, we speculate that our language preference findings differ from those of Nel and Muller (2010) showed English to be the most preferred language by the student teachers. This is in opposition with the study by Chivhanga and Sylod (2014) which showed that most student teachers did not prefer to teach indigenous language (ChiShona) as medium of instruction at primary school level. The findings also provided an insight of the participants’ ideologies on language preference of a positive reaction as individual speakers to their mother tongue as posited by Blackledge and Pavlenko (2002). The study suggested that the student language teachers’ preferences as well as their attitudes towards the African indigenous languages show that the power of language is created (Bourdieu, 1977) for future employment. In addition, Funza Lushaka was found to play a major role in ensuring that student language teachers are enrolled to perpetually uplift, produce and promote African indigenous languages.

Through the findings on student teachers’ preference to teach a language, my inference was that the indigenous languages could be intellectualised (Gonzalez, 2002) even though this could be a long-term goal to accomplish. According to Finlayson and Madiba (2002), intellectualisation of a language means a process in place for speeding up the growth and development of indigenous languages. However, afore-mentioned percentages are in opposition to thirty percentages of those who showed an interest in the fact that they would prefer to teach English. These small number of student teachers held the belief that in South Africa, language ideology favours English and those who speak English (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2002).

What are The Reasons for The Student Teachers' Preferences Regarding Languages to Teach When Employed?

Irrespective of the research participants' preferences of language being based on various reasons, most of them mentioned several recurring ideas which I found to be catching attention. The participants mentioned the main reasons that influenced or guided them in their choice or preference of language to teach at their future schools. A few of them mentioned that they preferred to teach a language at their future schools because they got stimulating influence or inspiration from their former language teachers. Those language teachers played a pivotal role as role models to the student teachers and mainly they were teachers of indigenous languages. They also instilled a pride in the future language teachers to continue carrying the legacy of such languages further. This became an obvious finding as some of the participants enhanced their reason for preference that they would also have enthusiasm to pass down the knowledge to the next generation. Furthermore, they were certain that their passion for the indigenous languages would assist them in enticing and encouraging younger generation by emulating their former language teachers as their role models. I believe that those role model teachers ensured that their teaching would impact positively in their learners' learning in order to ensure that learners are given essential tools for constructing further knowledge (Neeta & Klu, 2013).

The issue of identity became one of the fundamental factors in the findings as affirmed by some of the participants. Their affirmation about their preference is not only about teaching the indigenous language but to preserve their languages so that they do not gradually diminish (for those who preferred to teach indigenous languages). Besides the preservation of such languages, they also stated that they are concerned in passing down the legacy to both current and next generation so that they keep sustainment of the indigenous languages. In that regard, they believe that younger generation would have morals and knowledge of their identity which constitutes elements such as knowing who they are and where they come from. As postulated by one of the proponents of indigenous languages (wa Thiong'o, 1986), indigenous languages are regarded as carriers of not only an identity but a culture as well.

According to Little and Sanders (1992), learners are offered fewer opportunities than they need by their pedagogues in order to achieve control over what they have learned. However, those fewer opportunities could lead to demonstration of quantity of acquiring a required knowledge to the maximum level. Similarly, some of the participants have emphasised that their high expectations pertaining to acquiring knowledge were not precisely met. Those were a few who expressed their discontent concerning the inadequate knowledge that they get in the teacher programme, particularly in English specialisation. They showed a feeling of sadness and anxiety as far as their future as teachers was concerned; hence they added that they would not be able to execute and demonstrate teaching expertise in this specialisation subject (English). As a result, some preferred the other specialisation which was an indigenous language. Consequently, this occurred to be a course of concern for these student teachers as they do not absorb the knowledge in English as they were supposed to, which is contrary to what happens in programmes of the indigenous languages.

Although a small percentage of the participants preferred to teach English for their future employment at schools, they had various personal reasons that guided their preference. According

to Banda (2003), students have adopted the perception that indigenous language is not capable of accommodating the requirements of academic subjects. This could result in a linguistic hegemony which could in turn lead to a linguistic disparity (Phillipson, 1992). Among others, the participants mentioned that what interested them most was readily available and accessible utilisation of modern technology in English for any information they might need. In addition, their curiosity was one of the reasons which compelled or instigated them to prefer to teach English in order to explore the language. Notwithstanding their preference for English specialisation, some still considered themselves novices when coming to teaching of the language itself hence they mentioned a maximum immersion or exposure to their mother tongue and as such they would need to study hard on their own. We found this reason to be associated with what Banda (2003) had posited that students at university insist on English medium of instruction, write their academic tasks in English, but nonetheless perform discussions and preparations on academic subject matters in their MT. On contrary, high percentage of the research participants who preferred to teach indigenous languages were of the opinion that such languages have to be developed, uplifted and utilised to the extent of becoming mediums of instruction even in higher institutions of learning (Council on Higher Education, 2001).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to provide the language preferences by the pre-service teachers who specialise in English and an African indigenous language for their future employment. The focus was mainly on whether those pre-service teachers would take unsubsidised English and subsidised African indigenous language specialisation (preference of one language over the other hence they specialised in two languages: i. e. English plus African language). However, their preferences were found on various reasons such as keeping the legacy, exploring the language, maintaining the identity etc. They mentioned that they love their specialisations though they perceive both languages differently based either on negative or positive interpretation. Although, some of the participants who preferred to teach indigenous languages affirmed that the languages are restricted or constrained within a particular territory, others showed interest for indigenous languages that they (indigenous languages) reflect their true identity and as such they embrace their culture so that it does not decline and as such they would prefer to teach them at their future schools. Such teachers (indigenous language teachers) would also be promoting and therefore improving the position of the African languages particularly in younger generation and in schools. The participants who preferred English for future employment pointed out that they were curious and wanted to explore the language. According to the findings of this study, it was also found that Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme was viewed as effective in curbing the lack of African indigenous language teachers because those languages were one of the scarce skills subjects in schools. A new body of knowledge was provided by this study that the pre-service teachers demonstrated interest in teaching African indigenous languages for their future employment. As a result, the following recommendations were made drawn from the findings:

- The financial scheme should not only be deemed as enticement for academic financial benefits only, but to serve its primary purpose of producing future language educators,

therefore an impact of Funza Lushaka Bursary (as a financial source) on the uplifting of future African indigenous language teachers should be investigated.

- A research on the development of guidelines for an appropriate placement of future African indigenous language teachers at schools where there is such a need. A tangible strategic plan to find only those who are interested in being enrolled to teach especially indigenous languages, could be formulated. In this regard, the prospective language candidates who are interested should enhance their opportunities through providing a detailed motivation in order to be granted the bursary scheme.
- Most importantly, the study further provided an opportunity to investigate the teaching maintenance of the African indigenous languages among new teachers in the teaching field.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

MALEFEU MARIA SIGUDLA

Department of Language Education
University of Limpopo
sigudlamm@yahoo.com

THEMBINKOSI E MABILA

Department of Research Administration and Development
University of Limpopo
thembinkosi.mabila@ul.ac.za

HAPPY MATHEW TIRIVANGASI

Department of Research Administration and Development
University of Limpopo
Happy.tirivangasi@ul.ac.za
mathewtirivangasi@gmail.com