

REVIEW

On the Inconspicuousness of Indigenous African Languages: The Case of IsiZulu Linguistic Integration in KwaZulu-Natal's Basic Education Sector

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the challenges associated with the inconspicuousness of indigenous African languages in the South African education system, as established during empirical research conducted by the author for his PhD thesis. According to the findings of the research, integrating indigenous African languages in the basic education sector is a key strategic shift that should be considered for it could fast-track efforts to elevate and promote indigenous African languages as media of educational instruction. These languages have been discriminated against for decades, since the era of colonisation and Apartheid South Africa. Despite attempts by the democratic government, through transformative legislative frameworks, African languages are inconspicuous within the education sector. Institutions of learning have developed multilingual language policies yet their implementation remains a problem. Based on the critical review of the literature on indigenous African languages, and with a focus on information and communication technology (ICT), the paper investigates policy opportunities and challenges. The paper concludes by assessing the low profile of indigenous languages in education, and its likely impact on the high failure rate in South African schools.

1. Introduction

This article investigates the inconspicuousness of indigenous African languages. The empirical focus is IsiZulu use as alternative media for information and communication technology (ICT) instruction in KwaZulu-Natal schools as the indigenous African

language spoken by the majority in the country. This inconspicuousness is contrary to the democratic legislative framework, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996),^[2] the Language in Education Policy (1997)^[7] and the e-Education White Paper (2003).^[8] Inconspicuousness of IsiZulu therefore constitutes a major policy implementation failure.

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Policy development on ICT in education date back to 1995, with the establishment of the Technology Enhanced Learning Initiatives (TELI). The discrimination of indigenous African languages is based on the hypothesis that they are not capable of offering more socio-economic opportunities for learners as their counterparts. This happens despite the fact that the largest majority of the learner-population of KwaZulu-Natal province, are an indigenous African languages populace.

The computer-use was introduced into South African schools during the 1980s, primarily in private schools and a few well-resourced government schools. During this new dispensation in the Country, e-Education White Paper (2003)^[8] was tabled and it declares that all learners in the South African primary and secondary schools should be ICT capable by 2013. To achieve this, schools are expected to be developed into e-schools consisting of a community of both teachers and learners. Fourteen years later, South African schools are still dilly dally in ICT development and indigenous African languages are still marginalised. Central to this article is the question that the researcher focused on in his PhD study (Gumbi, 2017)^[18]: Is it possible for the basic Education department in KwaZulu-Natal to fast-track the transformation of schools into e-schools without taking indigenous African languages as backup languages of teaching, learning and assessment?

The potential of African languages within the ICT and education domains should not be belittled, given the advancement and impact of ICT within the South African public; the multilingual diversity, which is reflected in the learner populations of South African schools. It is imperative for schools to strategically integrate indigenous African languages into ICT. Such action have a potential to ensure a positive bearing in promoting African languages, which have suffered marginalisation dating back to the era of colonisation and Apartheid.

The infusion of indigenous African languages into ICT in the basic education sector is very important for the promotion of indigenous African languages and multilingualism. Since the spread of ICT, its elevated access and a number of opportunities that it offers, such a drive will elevate the status and the use of African languages as it is the case with Non-English languages in Europe that suffer the same problems as African languages.

1.1 Background

A number of initiatives have been put in place in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, in an effort to empower African languages. In some countries in Africa, most of these aspirations have been achieved through the advocacy of the United Nations and the African Union (AU)

in the form of charters and plans of action. These may include, the Language Plan of Action for Africa (OAU 1986)^[33]; Charter for the Promotion of African Languages in Education (OAU 1996)^[34]; The Harare Declaration (OAU 1996),^[20] The Asmara Declaration (Asmara Declaration 2000)^[11] and The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, Article 13 &14 (United Nations 2007).^[41] Other efforts include the founding of organisations which are committed to addressing this challenge. These are in a form of organisations such as UNESCO, the Regional Centre of Documentation on Oral Traditions and African languages (CERDOTOLA), the Centre of linguistic and historical studies through Oral tradition (CELHTO), the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) and the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA).

The Department of Education (DoE) stipulates that participation in the information society means that, “Every South African learner in the general and further education and training bands will be ICT capable by the year 2013” (DoE, Draft White Paper ,2003:17).^[9] ICT is central to the changes taking place throughout the world (DoE White Paper 7, 2004). A Successful integration of indigenous African languages into ICT in schools could ideally have a transformative effect on schools and the education system as a whole (ICT4RED, 2015).^[23]

Despite a number of democratic policy framework such as the constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996),^[38] Language-in Education Policy (1997),^[8] the National Language Policy Framework (Department of Arts and Culture 2003),^[6] among others, that seek to promote indigenous African languages, these languages are still discriminated against in terms of their inclusion and usage within basic education sector. English is still dominant in ICT, at the expense of indigenous African linguistic heritage. Although some schools in other provinces other than KwaZulu-Natal may have come up with multilingual language policies, the implementation however of these policies still remains a major challenge and a pipe dream for most learners that speaks African languages as home language.

1.2 Aims

This article aims to:

- 1) To investigate the language issues that are associated with the marginalisation of indigenous African languages in South African basic education, in KwaZulu-Natal;
- 2) To explore the various opportunities of integrating isiZulu as an indigenous African languages into ICT in schools ; and
- 3) To interrogate obstacles in integrating indigenous African languages into ICT

2. Theoretical Framework

The current South African constitutional and language policy frameworks put at the forefront the growth of previously discriminated indigenous African languages. It further recommends both positive and practical initiatives to be employed by all government parastatals and private sector for the promotion of indigenous African languages (Beukes 2008).^[2]

The Department of Basic Education is committed to the implementation of multilingualism agenda, the development of all official languages and the equal treatment of all languages used in the country, including South African sign languages and other languages referred to in the Constitution (Department of Education, 1997).^[8]

It is for this reason therefore that this paper is theoretically grounded on the concept of language-as-a-resource position which stresses the importance of multilingualism, as a facilitator of access to learning and as a door to economic opportunities (Gumbi & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2015:157).^[17]

The language-as-a-resource position is also found in the language planning model by Gumbi & Ndimande (2015).^[17] Gumbi & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2015:158)^[17] posits that language policy as formulated in the South African Constitution (1996)^[38] and the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) (1997)^[8] takes a particular paradigm, namely, that South Africa is characterised as a country that is multilingual in nature, with different languages as resources that promotes multilingualism as any other economic resource. This paradigm position and policy framework is designed to promote this multilingualism and build upon the linguistic knowledge that students from various linguistic communities bring to the classroom (Hornberger, 1991).^[22]

According to Cluver (1996, as cited by Gumbi & Ndimande-Hlongwa 2015: 158),^[17] the Japanese language, in Australia is not viewed as an impediment but as an alternative linguistic resource that smoother successful business transactions with Japan better than any other countries that use English for trading with the same country.

Within the context of South Africa, the plan to advance indigenous African languages has also been observed mainly through the attempts of the Department of Arts and Culture. The South African Department of Communications has deliberated all ICT initiatives in South African schools through its Electronic Communications and Transactions Act (2002).^[7] These initiatives seeks to promote the establishment of a Universal Service Agency (known as the Universal Service and Access Agency of Southern Africa (USAASA), a Universal Service Fund and Education Network (EduNet) all of which seeks to support and promote access and use of ICT in education institutions.

These attempts are informed by the South Africa's democratic constitutional framework that place at the centre multilingualism, language rights and the promotion of previously disadvantaged indigenous local languages. The South African Government is still striving towards achieving the practical benefits of digital technology. ICT is seen as the future and indeed the key to 21st Century teaching and learning goals (Department of Education, 2007)^[11]

The post-Apartheid Language Policy Framework (Department of Arts and Culture 2003)^[6] is one of the significant documents that has sought to obligate all government departments to a multilingual stance (Mesthrie 2006)^[31]. Other vital national imperatives include the Language in-Education Policy (1997)^[8] and the South African constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996).^[38]

The Language Education Policy & ICT Legislation Framework in The KwaZulu Natal Province

Disappointingly there is still a disjuncture between policies and their implementation especially the Language Education policies and the e-Education legislation framework in particular. There has been a lack of progress in this regard, since the new constitutional dispensation in 1994 (Heugh, 2006).^[21] According to Heugh (2006)^[21] the ANC-led government is to be blamed for a slow pace and stalling progress in implementing these legislations that are potentially empowering. He further posits that this failure has had disadvantageous effects on the achievement of multilingualism and integration of indigenous African languages into ICT within the current education system.

A number of ICT in Education initiatives (government, NGOs, private etc.) are implemented in an ad hoc fashion, i.e. without any proper co-ordination, support and leadership of the basic education department. Furthermore these initiatives do no focus on the professional development of teachers, maintenance support, technical support and pedagogical support, thus becoming unsustainable (Department of Education, KwaZulu-Natal Circular no. 10 of 2015:1-3).^[12]

The Provincial Language policy of KwaZulu-Natal (2008:3)^[25] seeks to promote the equitable use of ,as well as access to the four main official languages spoken in KwaZulu-Natal, viz, isiZulu, English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans in public institution, institutions of learning and to ensure the development and use of previously marginalised official African languages. Furthermore, the KwaZulu-Natal position on ICT in education (Department of Education, KwaZulu-Natal Circular no. 10 of 2015:4-5),^[12] support the White paper on e-education (2003).^[9] It further regards the e-education policy framework as a clear road-

map to deliver and manage curriculum in KwaZulu-Natal schools.

It was on this reason that on 16th January 2015, the HoD for Education in the province approved a summit where the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education officials were to engage with significant stakeholders on the integration of ICT into schools (Department of Education, KwaZulu-Natal Circular no. 10 of 2015:4-5).^[12] The MEC for Education; Honorable Peggy Nkonyeni re-iterated the same position when she said 'The need for the provision of ICT for learning and teaching is increasingly high and many educational institutions, especially public schools must explore these benefits to heighten the quality of learning and teaching' (Ibid)

Discussion on Legislation implementation

A study on the attitudes on the utilization of African languages as additional languages of the medium of instruction in KwaZulu-Natal schools shows that while the dominance of English as a language teaching and learning is acknowledged in the South African education sector, isiZulu can also play a significant role as an additional medium of instruction (Gumbi & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2015).^[17] South Africa is twenty three years into Democracy yet indigenous African Languages are still isolated from ICT and Education. Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty (2008)^[39] posits that assimilation in education should be viewed as the process whereby marginalised languages and groups are coerced to conform to dominant languages and groups by means of coercive strategies aimed at substituting the indigenous language and culture with the dominant one.

Furthermore, the omission of indigenous African languages in ICT, and the lack of the language policy implementation in the country further account for their absence in the ICT field, despite a large amount of existing legislations and other initiatives. Factors such as the digital divide, the hegemony of the English language and negative language attitudes towards African indigenous languages are amongst a plethora of contributory factors that are a tribute to this problem. Throughout the colonial era, African languages and African culture were denigrated and it is saddening to note that even in a post-colonial dispensation, the only reference to language in most African states is still English (Gudmundsdottir, 2010;^[16] Djite, 2005;^[13] Osborn, 2006^[36]). With regards to the digital divide, according to Osborn (2006)^[36] this problem continues because not much attention is being given to language problems in this country. Matula (2004)^[30] adds that the discussion on the integration of African languages into ICT has been sidelined in a number of African countries,

including South Africa and this according to him is an indication of the lack of a meaningful and implementable ICT legislative framework. More-over South Africa lacks a comprehensive policy on ICT in education that covers all sectors in education (Isaacs, 2007).^[37]

Omojola (2009:33)^[40] further argues that the possible opportunities which ICT presents should not be over emphasised within the context of indigenous populace of Africa, most of which usually use ICT gadgets and applications that are built into languages not familiar to them.

Nonetheless, Omojola (2009)^[40] argues further to say that there is a dire need though to integrate indigenous African languages into ICT. He also posits that the process of ICT policy implementation should start with local initiatives in developing indigenous African languages through various initiatives such as the publishing of media content on the internet and this would play a significant role in developing responsiveness amongst ICT product designers and according to him to improve the negative attitudes associated with these languages.

Explanation of Attitudes

Negative language attitudes according to Djite (2005),^[13] were inherited from the colonial legacy in the African continent. They have a significant contribution towards the exclusion of indigenous African languages in ICT. It has also been strongly argued that colonialism destroyed the importance as well as the role of indigenous African languages in the African continent, resulting in the myth that these languages do not have intellectual capacity, educational value and economic thus posing a barrier to social and economic growth (Djite 2005).^[13] English and other colonial languages are usually the primary languages by which people in the world access formal education and information. This is perpetuated not only by the speakers of Western languages but also by indigenous African language speakers themselves (Maseko et al. 2010).^[29] Furthermore, the influence of the English language has grown over the years to a level of a gate keeper in ICT against communities of indigenous African languages origin, in particular learners (Dalvit 2010).^[5]

Given the purported instrumental role of ICT in advocating curriculum transformation, lifelong learning, and breaking the digital divide, diverse participation and enhancement of the quality of education (Kajee & Balfour 2011),^[23] the integration of indigenous African languages is highly imperative. A majority of learners in KwaZulu-Natal rural and Township schools and are always exposed to one language, which is mother tongue and have no contact with other languages that are outside the classroom setup. These students, therefore are bound to strug-

gle to learn when lessons are only taught in English. This further contributes immensely to a plethora of problems including low literacy rates, early school drop-out rate and poor education quality. In contrary, however the integration of indigenous African languages into ICT shall address these problems and could further provide a platform for academic improvement, political, and socio-economic development (Webb, 2012).^[42]

Lack of Teacher Training in ICT

The lack of Indigenous African language teacher training in ICT has also been pointed out as one of the major reason for the slow pace of the integration of these languages into ITC. Their knowledge and abilities of using ICT is somewhat restricted. The ICT skills that educators possess is not at a level where they are confident enough to use them to enhance learning. Other challenges will range from the teacher's lack of skills to tailor-make learning activities that will promote learning through ICT. When there is low quality ICT teacher training, the use of ICT is compromised thus educators fail to achieve educational goals, learning and teaching suffers (Wilson-Strydom and Thomson, 2005).^[43]

The lack of knowledge of ICT in teaching hinders educator's readiness and confidence in using ICT for educational purposes. Consequently less confidence-educators in ICT do not develop competence in using ICT for teaching. This is because confidence is acquired through the use of computers over time and lack of accessibility is another challenge for educators. It is therefore expected that educators will lack ICT acumen if they cannot be in a position to make decisions on how and what content should be taught (Hennessy et al: 2010).^[19] Most teachers in South African public schools who have attended ICT training, their computer skills are generally at a very basic level. More-over their basic skills have proved inadequate to equip them with the abilities they so need in infusing African languages in ICT during their teaching (Isaacs, 2007).^[37] The South African Education sector is faced with a plethora of challenges from un-implemented policies to lack of resources. Nonetheless, it still has a huge obligation in delivering on public expectations of both an equal and quality education for social growth, economic growth and social inclusion.

Poor Infrastructure

In reality however, the integration of African languages into learning and ICT still remains a complex and a challenging process for schools, especially where there is limited previous experience in the use of ICT to support learning. Infrastructural challenges and the absence of indigenous languages in education in particular have com-

promised the nation-wide application of ICT in education (ICT4RED, 2015).^[26] Infrastructure may refer to resources and access to ICT and technical support.

A comparative study done in South Africa, in 2015 on the roll-out of ICT to schools shows that KwaZulu-Natal is still lagging behind, due to poor infrastructure. According this study Western Cape Province (56.8%) is leading all other provinces with schools using ICT for teaching and learning followed by, Gauteng (45.4%) and KwaZulu-Natal (10.4%) (Department of Education, 2003:12–13)^[6] Schools that have limited software and hardware, stand a minimal chance to roll-out ICT initiatives in their schools. Ertmer et al. (2012)^[15] posits that, there are various types of technical support that are a requirement to ensure effective integration of ICT into education. These may include peer administrative, professional and technological support. Teachers on the other hand need some kind of support that will deal with different technical and technological difficulties. Lack of this support in schools therefore hinders ICT roll-out in schools.

Opportunities of integrating indigenous languages within basic education sector

The integration of indigenous African languages into ICT and learning in the South Africa education sector would be of huge significance in improving indigenous African languages and the state of education. Osborn (2010)^[35] argues that, knowledge reproduction and dissemination of local content and knowledge in ICT is impossible in the absence of indigenous languages.

It is a widely accepted view that learning and knowledge production in class through a primary language and in literacy must be promoted through the implementation of initiatives that supports multilingualism (Cummings 2000).^[4] It is further asserted that learning through the use of indigenous African language preserves these languages and improves the quality of education and if they are integrated into ICT especially if introduced in the early years of childhood (Kamwangamalu 2000).^[24] Disappointingly so, the use of indigenous African languages as alternative tools for learning and teaching is still continuously restricted to disadvantaged schools in the townships and rural areas (Lafon 2008).^[27] Kamwangamalu (2000)^[24] posits that the use of home languages for teaching and learning enhances lessons and making them more interesting.

Learning takes occurs when the cognitive system is able to store information for further use (Dror, 2008).^[14] If the process has gaps, learning does not take place and even if some knowledge has been acquired, the learner may struggle to remember and also battle to use the knowledge to extend their own understanding or even

to engage in thinking exercises that requires merging of different ideas in solving complex tasks. Effective learning therefore, occurs when the teaching tools or learning activities are utilized and designed such that they develop the learning process in a way that the learner is in a position to independently operate at a higher order thinking level in addressing abstract forms of knowledge with ease (Dror, 2008).^[14]

In this context, when teaching strategies integrate indigenous African languages into ICT to create less difficult conditions in a learning environment, the likelihood of attaining a more advanced skill to obtain, preserve and apply knowledge is both possible and higher. In this manner, the quality of education and usage of African languages in ICT as an additional tool to learning, is achieved.

Associating Indigenous African languages with ICT is driven by notions that technology has a role of facilitating learning and enables the dissemination of the curriculum content. Such a view has its origins in the constructivist's theory that regards learning, firstly as an active process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring knowledge. Secondly it considers instruction as a process of supporting knowledge construction rather than communicating knowledge (Dror, 2008).^[14] This integration therefore given the role of ICT and Indigenous African languages will ensure learners interaction with knowledge, using the integration as a tools to improve the understanding of subject matter.

Such usage of ICT and indigenous African languages demands new approaches to the curriculum. This approach advocates for a humanistic model of ICT integration where African languages and technology are viewed as a tool which will empower learners with subject knowledge, problem solving skills and thinking skills, in this way the learner play a role of a constructor of knowledge who through exposure to ICT in home language is able to perform at a higher level. Therefore ICT and home language use in a learning environment becomes quality when it indigenous African languages use.

Challenges of Integrating Indigenous African Languages into ICT in basic Education

In practice however, the adoption and integration of African languages into ICT is a challenging and complex process for schools, particularly where there are limited resources in ICT to support teaching and learning. Infrastructural challenges and absence of indigenous languages in education in particular have compromised the nation-wide application of ICT in education initiatives (ICT4RED, 2015).^[26] More-over there is insufficient comprehensive policy on ICT in education that covers all sectors

in education (Isaacs, 2007).^[37]

Other problems that seems to affect the integration of indigenous African languages into ICT must be viewed within the context of the various related factors of localization ecology that affect the process of ICT localization namely society, language, economics, technology, education and politics. When ICT's are not available in a given local language, the opportunity to produce and disseminate local content (educational, administrative or tourism content) on the Internet is reduced. As a result, the chances that the culture conveyed by this language will be shared and made accessible to its speakers, researchers and linguists who would like to study it are also decreased. (Osborn 2010).^[25] These factors overlap since they are inter-related to provide a complete understanding of the challenges associated with the integration of indigenous African languages into ICT. Insufficient expertise and absence of collaboration between ICT experts and language experts presents another big challenge to ICT localization initiatives. There is somewhat a lack of interest if not an awareness of the impact of ICT localization among language experts, technological experts and government officials alike. At the same wave length, most language experts do not have the necessary ICT skills to design and tailor-make teaching and learning software. These challenges also translates into a shortfall of coherence between language and ICT policies in the South African education sector. Other factors are a shortage of financial resources to support localization initiatives. Localization is a costly process involving computer expertise, software and translation expertise among other things and is also a lengthy process. The current situation South Africa is that the stakeholders and investors are highly motivated to invest in localization initiatives as they view indigenous African languages as insignificant. It is also argued that negative perceptions towards indigenous African languages may contribute to a failure of localization initiatives. There is therefore a need for the department of basic education to introduce effective marketing approaches for localized education software to promote the use of indigenous African languages by learners, educators, and the local community. It is further argued that indigenous African language content is contributing a considerably low percentage of the entire web content. There is therefore an urgent need to increase the amount of localized web content and software as well as translation. The translation process however could require a huge effort and great deal of time as well as financial resources. More-over most translation tools lack accuracy and yet machine translation cannot be considered as an option to address such challenges. Furthermore, there is not enough grammar and therefore,

there is a need for development and modification.

3. Conclusion

If South African Government is really serious and committed to partake in the knowledge economy, therefore every effort must be put in place to prevent digital exclusion of indigenous African languages. This is mainly because a global revolution is currently taking place in the education sector. This revolution is not only driven by changing nature of work but also by government's obligation (the people's contract) to distribute equal educational opportunities.

The integration of African languages into ICT is essential not only in preserving indigenous African languages but in enhancing learning in the basic education system. The major opportunities available the inclusion of these languages as additional tools learning to address the already ailing education sector. The majority of South African educators are from disadvantaged schools and hence they need pedagogical knowledge to transform ICT content. Consequently so, ICT Training of teachers is imperative and shall play a critical role in enabling them to develop and for them to use ICT tailor-made resources. The focus has got to be on real-life and relevant experiences of both learners and teachers with the available instruments in their subject teaching contexts whilst integrating African languages.

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