

Minority Language Use and Early Educational Hurdles in Botswana

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Introduction

In an almost monolingual country such as Botswana it is easy for people to take minority language users for granted. Their linguistic problems, especially in education, can become easily overlooked. Although Setswana is the national language and although some 90% of the population speaks Setswana, either as a first or second language, there are many people who do not speak Setswana at home. As such, they have to learn Setswana at school and use it as a medium of instruction for the first four years before switching to English, a third language. English and Setswana determine the educational achievement of minority language users for the rest of their lives. It is important, therefore, to systematically evaluate the educational performance of children who speak languages other than Setswana at home and compare their performance with that of children who speak Setswana at home. This will indicate disparities in the acquisition of literacy skills by minority language users if any.

Methodology

Eighteen primary schools distributed throughout the country were selected for the study. Nine schools were selected from villages which are predominantly Setswana speaking. These schools were classified as category A. The other nine schools were selected from villages representing nine minority languages in Botswana. These schools were classified as category B. In all of the eighteen schools, questionnaires were distributed to teachers of standards five, six and seven classes.

The questionnaire solicited information such as teacher rating of students' English proficiency, availability of teaching materials in their schools and whether they felt that children who come to school with little or no-competence in Setswana have any special problems.

Individual teachers and students were also interviewed. They were asked about the language they speak, read, write and comprehend better, and which language they preferred as a medium of instruction. They were also asked how they felt about the language of instruction. Responses from each interviewee were written down (in short form) on an interview form.

Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) results from 1980 - 1985 were examined to see if there is a pattern in performance between minority language users and Setswana speaking students. Special attention was given to their English and Setswana results.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed in two ways:

- A) The teachers' responses on both the questionnaire and the interview were scrutinized to see how each category rated their children.
- B) The data were then analysed according to standards in each category, to see how children in the same standard but in different categories perform as seen by their teachers.

Results

Students in Setswana Speaking Villages

At standard five students' ability in comprehension, speaking, reading and writing in Setswana is satisfactory. When they get to standard six, reading and writing in English begins to improve. They begin to write as good compositions in English as they do in Setswana (See table 1).

Students From Minority Language Villages

Comprehension (when the teacher speaks in class) in Setswana as well as writing skills in Setswana are comparatively low at Standard Five. At Standard Six, their 'comprehension and writing' ability gets better. Reading and speaking however remains a problem. At Standard Seven, performance in English begins to improve in the first three skills.

At standard five, ability in English is much lower than it is in Setswana. This situation continues to standard six but at standard seven, more students are able to do better

in the first three skills in English and they begin to write as good compositions in English as they do in Setswana.

Common Features

Speaking ability in English remains low for both categories throughout their primary school lives. The motivation to learn English for both groups is very high. They see English as a very important subject for getting a job and speaking to foreigners. Other important subjects are maths and science.

Both groups preferred to use English as a medium of instruction for the same reason as above. Students from minority language villages preferred to use their mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the classroom.

Table 1: How Category A Teachers Compared their Students' Ability in Comprehension, Speaking, Reading and Writing in Setswana and English

Skills	Std. 5		Std. 6		Std. 7	
	Eng.	Sets.	Eng.	Sets.	Eng.	Sets.
Comprehension	12.5%	87.5%	11.1%	88.7%	66.7%	22.2%
Reading	28.6%	57.1%	44.4%	11.1%	55.6%	33.3%
Writing	11.2%	85.7%	44.4%	44.4%	33.3%	55.6%
Speaking	9.5%	60.2%	11.6%	87.0%	6.2%	71.0%

Table 2: How Category B Teachers Compared their Students' Ability in Comprehension, Speaking, Reading and Writing in Setswana and English

	Std. 5		Std. 6		Std. 7	
Skills	Sets.	Eng.	Sets.	Eng.	Sets.	Eng.
Comprehension	25.0%	62.5%	12.5%	75.0%	65.5%	23.4%
Reading	37.5%	50.0%	37.5%	51.2%	62.5%	37.5%
Writing	37.5%	64.4%	12.5%	75.0%	37.5%	37.5%
Speaking	9.1%	39.5%	13.6%	41.0%	6.2%	53.0%

Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE)

The PSLE results - for the past six years indicate that Setswana speakers perform better in Setswana than other speakers.

Table 3: Average Percentage Performance of Category A Schools

Subject/Year	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
English	41.1	37.3	39.2	41.2	41.5	37.7
Setswana	45.0	51.6	40.3	48.0	46.5	43.0

Table 4: Average Percentage Performance of Category B Schools

Subject/Year	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
English	37.2	37.4	33.9	38.2	35.1	37.7
Setswana	27.3	20.3	24.1	18.6	29.5	23.5

Table 5: Percentage Difference

Subject/Year	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
English	3.9	0.1*	5.3	2.9	6.4	0.0
Setswana	17.7	31.3	16.2	29.4	17.0	19.5

* = in favour of other speakers.

Discussion

Educational Implications

Comprehension and speaking ability that the Setswana speakers bring to the classroom from home serve as an advantage for them and the lack of these two skills by the other speakers serve as a disadvantage for them throughout their primary school lives.

While other speakers are still working on acquiring comprehension and speaking in Setswana Setswana speakers are already working on reading and writing in Setswana.

When other speakers are working on reading and writing in Setswana Setswana

speakers are already working on reading and writing in English. This is the central problem - Other speakers are a step behind the skill acquisition process. The ability to write in both languages (the grey area) for Setswana speakers comes at standard six and at standard seven for other speakers (Tables 1 and 2).

This clearly indicates the disadvantage the other speakers face with the PSLE.

The PSLE results (tables 3 and 4) clearly indicate that minority students have problems in Setswana. The percentage differences are greater (table 5), which might suggest that they could have better results if the Setswana mark were excluded from the PSLE aggregate. The problem of lack of comprehension at lower standards as described above is a contributing factor to lower performance by other speaking children.

The attitude toward Setswana is not very positive. First of all Setswana is competing with English which is seen as very important. Secondly Setswana is not a language for upward mobility and, therefore, there is no motivation to learn it. The best they want to do is acquire it and use it as a national language, outside the classroom.

Teachers disclosed that they use Setswana in the classroom most of the time because of their students' lack of comprehension in English. This implies that other speakers might not understand both languages in certain instances, therefore, hampering learning. On the other hand, this might help them acquire comprehension in Setswana.

When does learning in a third language make a difference?

1. When both the teacher and students are other speakers but with different first languages, (LI's) then the teacher tends to use English most of the time since he

is not fluent in Setswana. English then becomes the lingua franca in this - classroom facilitating the acquisition of English - an example of this situation was found in Sepopa where a teacher was Subiya and his students were Bayei and Bambukushu. This situation works against the acquisition of Setswana and, hence the low performance in Setswana by other speaking students.

2. When both the teacher and the students are other speakers and are sharing the same LI, this will serve as the interpreting language when students fail to comprehend in English. This situation is true of only one ethnic group, the Bakalaka. Bakalaka teachers use Sekalaka in class (when their class is predominantly Sekalaka speaking) for interpreting when students do not understand English or Setswana.

This situation works against the acquisition of Setswana but promotes the acquisition of English. Sekalaka in the classroom serves the purpose of providing comprehensible input (Krashen, 82.p9) for the acquisition of English.

3. When both the teacher and students are Setswana speakers, and the teacher is not very competent in English, then the classroom language is almost always Setswana working against the acquisition of English. When the teacher is competent in English, Setswana serves as an interpreting language, therefore, facilitating the acquisition of English. PSLE results indicate that for four years, (1980, 82,83, and 84) Setswana speakers have done better in both subjects than other speakers. It is important to note that the English percentage pass marks do not indicate wider margins between the two categories as does Setswana percentage marks which consistently indicate low performance by other speakers with wider margins between the two categories (See tables3 and 4).

It is evident then that it is easier for a learner to deal with two languages when one

is their LI than with two languages when neither is their LI. It seems only logical then that other speakers should acquire ground competence (speaking and comprehension) in Setswana before they can be expected to learn in it and embark on English. Research indicates that when children master literacy skills in their first language, it is easy to transfer such skills in to the second language - UNESCO (1983). Minority students could therefore, do better in Setswana if they are taught their first language. However, some students (Butcher, 1982) indicate that the learning situation determines whether mother tongue is necessary or not.

Otherwise it would seem logical to call for their LI or eliminate Setswana and remain with English as it is the case in Zambia (Banda, 1986). Two factors seem to matter when learning in a third language: 1) when the learner does not use the first language in the learning process and 2) has little competency in the second language.

Sociolinguistic Implications: The Question of Nation Building

Botswana is caught up in a dilemma. On the one hand there is Setswana a unifying language, a language of cultural heritage, a language of wider communication within Botswana. But at the same time it is a language working against the faster acquisition of English, a language greatly needed for technological development and upward mobility the language of business and wider communication within and beyond the borders of Botswana and Africa. These two languages are both important.

Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland are fortunate nations within Southern Africa in that they have resolved the question of which native language to use as a national language because of their almost monolingual nature. The remaining question is how can they promote and preserve the culture and tradition in the midst of western influence. Perhaps recommendation number four above could be the answer, hence the greatest need is to continue to work for true unity seems that the government has

been reluctant to implement suggestions made by the National Commission on Education (1977) in matters of language in education and society. The study by Keatimilwe and Komarek, (1985) reiterates these suggestions that attention be paid to the teaching of Setswana, and especially to monitor language groups.

Recommendations

One factor that is clear from the findings is that, Botswana has to review her language policy both at policy and implementation levels. One of the following could be done:

1) Intensify the teaching of Setswana at pre-schools and lower levels in other speaking schools to facilitate comprehension and speaking ability in Setswana before beginning to teach in it. Implementing Breakthrough to Setswana in other speaking schools could be helpful.

OR

Remove the Setswana mark for other speakers from their PSLE aggregate since it is a clear disadvantage for them.

AND

2) Introduce English as a medium of instruction at standard three, not at standard five, to allow its acquisition more time before they sit for the PSLE in English. The three years (standard five six and seven) are not enough for one to acquire the necessary learning skills for a foreign language and write an important examination in it. This, however, would be useful to everyone and not just other speakers.

- 3) Concentrate on teacher education. The teacher education department should train the kind of teacher who is competent in spoken and written English, in both theory and practice of language learning and teaching in different cultural settings. Language teaching in Botswana needs attention especially in the areas of language across the curriculum and bilingual education.
- 4) Our educational system needs to be carefully looked into and be the kind of system which removes negative attitudes between different ethnic groups, a kind of system which will help every citizen know and appreciate the differences in cultures and languages which exist in this country and endorse them as important facets of the total culture of Botswana. How can this be achieved?. Perhaps not by teaching all the languages in the country but by teaching the cultures and traditions which exist in the country, making them part of the curriculum. The nine - year curriculum has this task to perform; to include the findings of sociologists and anthropologists who have conducted research into the cultures of various ethnic groups.

Conclusion

There seems to be a need for the government to:

- 1) make a clearly documented language policy which will recognize all ethnic groups as existing in their own right (see how they are presently classified, in Nyati-Ramahobo (1991).
- 2) Clearly define the role of Setswana as a national language as it is used in governmental spheres such as education, parliaments the court of law and so on to suit the needs of Batswana in such spheres.

In this paper I have argued that the unifying language, Setswana poses a problem for other speaking children in the primary school system. I have also linked this reality with the idea of nation building and ethnic equality. The areas of language teaching and learning and anthropology need greater attention now than ever.

Notes

1. The nine minority Language groups in Botswana are:

- A. Bakalaka. They occupy the North-eastern part of the country along the Zimbabwe - Botswana border. Their language Sekalaka is closely related to Shona (a Zimbabwean language).
- B. Bayei, Bambukushu and Basubiya. These three groups originate in Central Africa. They occupy the Northern part of the country.
- C. Bakgalagadi occupy most of the Kgalagadi desert in the South-western part of the country. Some are found in the North.
- D. Bakgothu and Afrikaans occupy the Southern part of the country, along the South African border.
- E. Basarwa (the Bushmen). They occupy the South-western part and the North - central.
- F. Baherero originate from Namibia. They occupy the North and parts of the Central.

For full descriptions refer to Obondo, Okoyo (1986).

Tswana speaking groups include Bangwato, Batawana, Bangwaketse, Bakwena, Balete, Batlokwa, Barolong and Bakgatla.

2. The research project, of which this paper is a result, was initially titled: Learning in a third Language: Does it matter?

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