# Training multilingual English language teachers: challenges for higher education

*Christa van der Walt*

*In South Africa, English is used as a language of learning and teaching for most students from Grade 4 onwards. National policies have requirements for all teachers regarding language proficiency in English, and they also require all teachers from Grades R (pre-school) to 6 to be English language teachers. Because most teachers are not English home language speakers, it is necessary to build academic language proficiency across school subjects along the lines of multilingual content and language integrated learning (MCLIL). National policy documents show little awareness of this and constrain teacher education for multilingual contexts.*

**Key words:** multilingual teacher education, multilingual CLIL, higher education, English as a language of learning and teaching

## Introduction

English as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT) at primary and secondary school is firmly entrenched in anglophone Africa and is gaining in popularity in francophone countries too. Tom-Lawyer and Thomas (2019: 83) argue that the growing interest in English in francophone West Africa is based mainly on what they call socio-economic factors. Although French is still used as a LoLT, the use of English for commerce and as the working language for regional organizations supports positive attitudes and a demand for English. None of the colonial languages in Africa has fostered additive multilingualism (Hamid, Nguyen, and Kamwangamalu 2014), neither have they improved educational outcomes. In a special issue of *Current Issues in Language Planning* (2014, Volume 15/1), the negative effects of colonial languages on educational success are detailed. Bietenbeck, Piopiunik, and Wiedehold (2015:1) claim that although there may be an increase in school enrolments, 'children in these [developing] countries are learning remarkably little in school'.

There are many reasons for this situation, such as socio-economic status linked to parental literacy levels, but the fact remains that marginalizing local languages is discriminatory and wrecks children's scholastic careers. As Hamid, Nguyen, and Kamwangamalu (2014:1) point out, 'language practices in Kenyan schools, *as elsewhere in Africa*, tend to prioritize the use of English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) at the expense of

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students' first languages' (emphasis added). Particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, 'the average performance of students [...] is dismal compared to students in other countries at the same stage of economic development' (Bietenbeck, Piopiunik, and Wiedehold 2015:1). Using colonial instead of local languages is 'seen as responsible for educational failure, including high school dropouts and students' inability to read in both the mother tongue and English' (Hamid, Nguyen, and Kamwangamalu 2014:1). Hamid, Nguyen, and Kamwangamalu (2014:2) also point to the failure of language-in-education policies, concluding that 'English and French are promoted while local languages are disparaged *even when they are promoted by national policies*' (emphasis added).

This statement raises the question, *who* disparages these languages? Education authorities will supposedly monitor the implementation of language-in-education policies. Could we blame them? Or the teachers? Or the parents who may decide to send their children to English-only (often private) schools? In her study of a South African school where the principal tried to engage with regional education authorities to include isiXhosa as a LoLT, Heugh (2009) describes the struggle to get answers and support from them. In his description of language-in-education policies in South African schools, Kretzer (2013: 223–5) reports that principals have a significant impact on policy implementation, which can contribute to the role of African languages being diminished at school level. Parental choices in South Africa certainly show their preference for English-only schools, when they can afford them.

This backdrop is useful when discussing the South African context, with its eleven official languages. Here a regional home language is the LoLT for the first three years of schooling, with a switch to English (rarely to Afrikaans) in Grade 4. Attempts to use home or community languages beyond the mandated first three years of education are piecemeal. At the same time, the complexity of the linguistic landscape in the form of urban language varieties and what Prinsloo and Krause (2019: 164) call 'fluid urban languaging resourcefulness' is a challenge for education in general and the development of literacy in particular. Although Prinsloo and Krause (2019: 171) present a compelling argument for translingual writing to increase educational quality, it seems unlikely that this will be translated into formal policy or curriculum practices. The arguments for using standardized languages are strong and rarely challenged. Until such time, South African teacher training programmes are constrained by policies that require the training of teachers to develop literacy and mathematical skills in English beyond the first three years of so-called home language teaching. This means that students and teachers are multilingual, and teachers could benefit from being trained to implement multilingual teaching strategies. There is no dearth of examples of such practices in higher education.

Of course, examples of primary and secondary school teachers' translanguaging practices are equally numerous, but these strategies are not necessarily built into teacher training programmes and more importantly, they are frowned upon. As Probyn (2005: 258) found in her study of South African teachers and their translanguaging practices:

> They [the students] will blame us, they will say, "Teacher used to teach in Xhosa, though it [the examination] is always set in English, that is why we have a high failure rate" (science teacher).

It is therefore important to recognize the challenges of training teachers for multilingual teaching. In this respect, the teacher training context in which this article was written is that of an officially bilingual university. Different language arrangements are in place to manage learning and there are initiatives to use one of the official African languages in learning and teaching. However, language teaching subjects are exempt from these arrangements, and it is accepted that teaching and learning will be done in one language only. Student teachers need to develop content knowledge in the form of literature and linguistic aspects of particular languages as well as academic biliteracy in other subjects. The layers of language use in teacher education mean that a multilingual orientation is needed urgently.

## The language policy landscape for teacher education in South Africa

The *Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions*[1] (LPF 2020) is an example of language status planning; formulated to find a place for African languages in higher education. The policy calls upon universities 'to adopt a flexible approach in the implementation of English as the language of learning and teaching' (LPF 2020: 15). The policy links higher education to school education, with an explicit reference to the training of language teachers for African languages (LPF 2020: 17).

Teacher education needs to take cognizance of what happens at school level, which directs the shape of university teacher training programmes. The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications[2] (MRTEQ 2015: 13) document demands that

> All teachers who successfully complete an initial professional qualification should be proficient in the use of at least one official South African language as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT), and partially proficient (i.e. sufficient for purposes of basic conversation) in at least one other official African language, or in South African Sign Language, as language of conversational competence (LoCC). If the LoLT is English or Afrikaans, then the LoCC must be an African Language or South African Sign Language.

This requirement is complicated by the history of English language teaching in South Africa. Because English (and to a far lesser extent Afrikaans) is the LoLT, proficiency in the language is important and universities are expected to endorse student teachers' proficiency. Although schools can theoretically choose any of the official languages for learning and teaching purposes, English remains the most popular choice.

The MRTEQ (2015: 27) document added a layer of complexity for pre-school and primary-school teachers by expecting them to *also* train as English language teachers. There are additional requirements for English home language (EHL) speakers:

> If a student selects English as a Home Language, the methodology of teaching English as a First Additional Language must also be offered, and the student must study an additional official language (other than English) at the level of Home Language or First Additional Language.

Although English is not a compulsory subject at school, virtually all students take it. The compulsion is societal and personal, which is probably much stronger than a statutory requirement.

## English as a home or first additional language?

The idea that children should be exposed to English as a LoLT from the start can be ascribed to the popular belief among parents that the sooner you start learning and the more time you spend on learning, the better the learning outcomes (Probyn 2005: 250). Small-scale studies show parents deciding to use English in the family home. In their survey of census data, Posel and Zeller (2016: 365) point out that 'the share of Africans who reported English as either L1 or L2 increased dramatically, from 4% in 1996 to 30% in 2011'. However, they conclude that this does not mean a shift away from home languages, but rather increased evidence of multilingual practices in the home.

The fact remains that English is claimed as a home language or, as Bobda (2006) frames it, a 'new mother tongue'. With reference to Cameroon, Bobda (2006: 62) makes the bold statement that

> the type of English or French that is said to have taken up the function of mother tongue for many Cameroonian children is NOT British / American English or Parisian French. It is the Cameroonian variety of English or French . . .

This situation is also found in South African classrooms, as Harmse and Evans (2017: 142) point out, 'novice teachers discover that the students seated in their English Home Language (EHL) classrooms, are not a homogenous linguistic group but represent disparate levels of English proficiency and diverse academic, social and cultural backgrounds'.

The distinction between English as a home language (EHL) or first additional language (EFAL) has become one of the most problematic distinctions in teaching and learning English because it has little to do with language proficiency and everything to do with the status of English. The perception is that the EHL curriculum is 'superior' and should be followed by 'clever' students. Some schools that offer both curricula follow a streaming process, whereby students are grouped for the one or the other curriculum based on a placement test. The students who score well on the test are grouped in the EHL classes and the rest in EFAL classes. In other cases, parents decide whether their children should follow the EHL or the EFAL curriculum. The difference between them is explained as follows (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (referred to as CAPS), EHL Grades 4 to 6, 2011: 8):

> [T]he labels Home Language and First Additional Language refer to the proficiency levels at which the language is offered and not the native (Home) or acquired language (as in the additional languages).

This statement appears in all the language curricula from the Intermediate Phase onwards. Despite the explanation in the quote above, the Foundation Phase curriculum for English home language[3] (CAPS EHL Grades 1 to 3, 2011: 8) states that '[t]he Languages programme is integrated into all other subject areas. Language is used across the curriculum in all oral work, reading and writing'. If EHL merely refers to language level, it is difficult to see when and how a student who does not use English as a home language would cope in a home language class. The situation is challenging for teachers who need to develop literacy in English (as a home language) when students have no knowledge of the language.

Considering the MRTEQ (2015: 27) requirements, pre-service teachers in the General Education and Training band (the compulsory schooling period) need to show their ability to use English as a LoLT to a sufficient level *and* teach EFAL in addition to their specialisation subjects, from Grade 4 onwards. Because the policy supports 'home language' instruction in the first three years of schooling, the challenge for teachers (and teacher educators) is to acknowledge this multilingual situation and develop multilingual strategies. This would imply adopting a truly multilingual CLIL (MCLIL) from the first three years of school onwards because teachers need to develop students' academic literacies in the LoLT. This would mean a re-organisation of higher education programmes as well.

## Whose home language? Why additional languages?

Teaching English and training English language teachers in post-colonial contexts are contentious. Kumaravadivelu's (2016: 68, 69) description of his non-native English speaking teacher trainees' experiences shows the ingrained perception that native speakers of English are the preferred candidates for teaching and for teacher education. Using the term *native speakerism,* Kumaravadivelu (2016: 73) points to the problem with language teaching methodologies that 'promote the native speaker's presumed language competence, learning styles, communication patterns, conversational maxims, cultural beliefs, and even accent as the norm to be learned and taught'. He mentions the widespread adoption of Communicative Language Teaching as an example. The Communicative Approach and the text-based approach underpin the South African language curricula.

Although communicative competence and the ability to understand and produce texts are fundamental to using English for academic purposes, the focus in the EFAL curriculum is elsewhere. As Kaiser, Reynecke, and Uys (2010: 54) argue, 'the content of the FAL [English as a first additional language] syllabus is similar to that of the Home Language in terms of the focus on creative writing, the study of literature, and the study of grammar instead of equipping students with academic literacy skills'. Despite the fact that both EHL and EFAL curricula mention the importance of using English for academic purposes (CAPS EFAL Grades 10 to 12, 2011: 8, 9 as well as CAPS EHL Grades 10 to 12, 2011: 9), they focus on traditional content that assumes students will communicate in English outside the classroom. Although this would be the primary need for students who learn English in English-speaking countries (where the Communicative Approach originated), the majority of South Africans will not necessarily encounter much English outside the classroom because they use their home languages to communicate with friends and family.

In addition to the development of communicative competence, studying Shakespeare and other English literature and writing diary entries seem more important to curriculum developers than students understanding, for example, their Geography textbook. Even if the traditional curriculum for English were to be revised to focus on the development of academic literacy, this would only be possible when content teachers are also trained to support the development of academic literacy in their *multilingual* classrooms. This is the type of MCLIL orientation that teacher education in South Africa needs to take seriously, without falling into the trap of a monolingual ideology, as described by Martí and Portolés (2019: 18), where 'CLIL is presented as the embodiment of Communicative Language Teaching' and where a 'naturalistic' or immersion approach to language learning is seen as the most effective way to learn a new language. South African language teacher education is not immune to the problems experienced around the world and we share many of the problems pointed out by Kumaravadivelu (2016).

It is clear that the school curricula have an influence on teacher education and mirrors the EHL–EFAL distinction. In terms of the MRTEQ (2015) document, student teachers select which home language they will be teaching, and they all need to be able to teach English as a first additional language. The language *proficiency* requirement in this document seems to have become confused with the *teaching* of EHL and EFAL. To be able to teach the EHL or EFAL curriculum should not have anything to do with whether one is a EHL or EFAL user of the language. If one wanted to avoid the native speakerism trap, one would assume that all English language teachers are fluent and proficient, whether they are EHL or EFAL speakers. The presumption is that EHL speakers should teach an EHL curriculum, and EFAL speakers should be teaching that curriculum, despite the former classroom including mainly speakers from the latter.

## Language teacher training from multiple perspectives

Prospective language teachers require knowledge of grammar and literature, which would include critical language awareness integrated with visual literacy. In addition, they need to master the academic language of their subjects at the school level that they will teach. Regarded as proficiency in the language of learning and teaching by the MRTEQ (2015) document, this mastery requires language proficiency of the highest level. An inability to use the language adequately can lead to teachers not being able to make their pupils understand academic concepts, as Evans and Cleghorn (2010: 143) found:

> The student teacher demonstrates to the Grade Rs how a balloon is inflated by the gas created after combining bicarbonate of soda and vinegar . . . She tells the learners to 'look at the balloon blow up'. The learners watch in keen expectation of an explosion.

By not using the correct term 'inflate', the student teacher causes confusion and misses the opportunity to teach a scientific term. In Afrikaans, 'to blow up' (*opblaas*) can mean to inflate or to explode. At this point, academic literacy and language proficiency overlap. The monolingual orientation of university training means that students do not compare and contrast terminology in different languages, which means that they are not aware of possible terminological traps.

Martí and Portolés (2019: 28) point towards the problems that occur when additional language learning is not approached from a multilingual orientation:

> by failing to see that multilingualism *cannot* be boosted without adopting a multilingual focus to additional language learning, quality CLIL will not be possible and the pedagogical potential of this teaching approach to content, language, cognition and culture will be irremediably wasted.

In my own research and teaching I have not even found much understanding or awareness among pre-service teachers for different varieties of English, let alone other languages in the English classroom (Van der Walt 2007). Prospective language teachers' training is still conceived of in terms of separate language subjects: at Stellenbosch University there are lecturers for English, for Afrikaans and for isiXhosa language teaching. In 2020 a module named Multilingual Education was introduced for the first time in the Bachelor of Education qualification. However, it does not make much sense to preach the gospel of multilingual education in one five-credit module in a four-year bachelor's programme, while remaining in strictly separate language silos for the rest of the time.

Keeping languages separate is only part of the problem. Teacher training needs to reflect an orientation that integrates language and content teaching as foreseen by CLIL and CBI approaches, but with the inclusion of translanguaging strategies. When one studies the English curricula, developing academic language proficiency seems the responsibility of English teachers, who need to 'teach across the curriculum' (CAPS EFAL Grades 10 to 12, 2011: 8, 9). One has to agree with Kaiser, Reynecke, and Uys (2010: 58) that '[a]cademic literacy can only be promoted once all content teachers understand how learning tasks, content and language interact'. Teacher training needs to embrace this idea, learning from tried and tested CLIL models, so that all content subjects develop academic literacy from a multilingual teaching and learning perspective. This is the m-CLIL approach that is needed.

## Ways forward for multilingual teacher education and training

It is traditional to look at the way in which higher education pre-requisites trickle down to school level. In Europe, the increasing use of English as a language of learning and teaching at higher education level has led to an increase in CLIL-type schools. However, as I have showed in this article, the reverse is happening as far as South African teacher education is concerned: curricula at school level have an impact on university teacher education programmes.

It is in the interests of higher education in South Africa that it recognizes the problems of statutory requirements and that it revises its own training programmes to account for the multilingual nature of university and school classrooms. Universities cannot blindly implement policies that seem to perpetuate monolingual ideologies. Re-thinking the traditional structure of teacher education programmes must be the starting point, so that the multilingual reality of our schools and prospective teachers is reflected there. My university is multilingual and provides the space for multilingual teaching and learning; it seems almost perverse *not* to exploit that fact. Adapting truly MCLIL teacher training models to the South African context should be investigated urgently at institutional as well as national levels.

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## Notes

1. Available at https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202011/43860gon1160.pdf, accessed on 21 March 2021
2. At https://bit.ly/32oNvIj
3. At CAPS English HL GRADES R-3 FS.pdf (education.gov.za) and CAPS FET _ FAL _ ENGLISH GR 10–12 _ WEB_65DC.pdf (education.gov.za) and English CAPS.indd (sahistory.org.za)

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