

## LITASA Conference 2019 Masifunde Ditale

### Conference report on multilingual textbooks:

#### How could a multilingual pedagogy be realised in textbooks? Some lessons for South Africa from Rwanda and Tanzania

In his keynote address to the conference, Professor Leketi Makalela from Wits University outlined a number of ways in which learning materials could support a multilingual pedagogy and translanguaging teaching and learning strategies. He listed integrated and multilingual textbooks, monolingual texts that teachers mediate multilingually, as well as textbooks that have one page in one language followed by the same page translated into another language, as examples.

In the workshop run by John Simpson (Rwanda) and Casimir Rubagumya (Tanzania), followed by their panel discussion with Ingrid Sapire (Wits), we were given an exciting opportunity to see how multilingualism could work in textbooks.

As in South Africa, school learning in Rwanda and Tanzania is severely compromised because teaching and learning is in English only (from higher primary in Rwanda, and high school in Tanzania). In Tanzania, for example, all learning in primary school is in Kiswahili and a complete shift to all learning in English happens at the beginning of high school. So children come to high school with lots of knowledge, which they are unable to access and draw on in English-only high school classrooms. The official textbooks are written using a level of English which is inaccessible to learners.

The aim of the language support textbooks currently being developed and trialled in Rwanda and Tanzania, is to create opportunities for children to use the language that they know best to make the transition to English.

The Maths, Biology, Physics and Chemistry textbooks for Form 1 (grade 8) are characterised by the following features:

- Glossaries of terms in English and Kiswahili (Tanzania) or English and Kinyarwanda (Rwanda)
- Short texts in accessible English
- Lots of visual support in the form of illustrations and diagrams
- Opportunities for learners to discuss content in the language they know and to use code-switching in their reading and writing
- Knowledge is presented in contexts that are relevant and culturally appropriate.

The materials are developed by local writers and illustrators, with support from British experts in multilingualism.

Subject teachers are trained in the use of the materials, as a way of boosting their understanding that all teachers should be aware of their learners' language needs. In this

project, each teacher is seen as a language teacher and the languages that children bring to their learning are seen as a resource.

The materials have been tested in a pilot scheme and their efficacy is being evaluated in the research aspect of the project. Dr Rubagumya reported that after using the textbooks pupils are more confident to answer in English and are more active in their learning.

In Tanzania, the project is an inter-institutional one, involving co-operation across a number of tertiary institutions, including two universities and a number of teacher training colleges. The vision is to extend the project to work with a wide range of stake holders, including policy makers, teacher educators, curriculum developers and textbook publishers. In Rwanda, the project is supported by researchers at Bristol University in England and the British Council.

Ingrid Sapire reported on her Maths Foundation Phase multilingual project currently underway in Gauteng. She explained that they are developing materials, which have had multiple iterations. Sapire confirmed that research shows that children learn Maths better in their home language and that using more than one language can be beneficial.

But the context is complicated by the many contradictions in our system, for example our Language in Education Policy (1997) supports multilingual learning; the DBE sees the Foundation Phase as providing for all 11 eleven languages, but Foundation Phase Maths teachers are trained to teach Maths in English only.

Sapire's research into what teachers in Gauteng are actually doing showed that English is dominant. While many teachers are comfortable using mixed language practices, most teachers believe that Maths should be taught in English. This is compounded by issues of standardisation in African languages, with teachers believing strongly that home language maths vocabulary is not adequate.

What are the questions for us in South Africa?

- **How do the materials make an impact in a potentially hostile or contradictory official policy and practice environment?**

In Rwanda, the project has a good relationship with the Ministry of Education. The materials were developed with the help of foreign funding. But more recently there has been resistance and a return to monolingual orientations. In Tanzania, an ambiguous language policy has created the space for the project to exist, where it is tolerated by the Ministry. But while the materials legitimise the translanguaging teachers engage in, there remains pressure on them to do the 'right thing' and 'Speak English!' Ongoing piloting, teacher training and research that shows the positive impact of the materials need to happen to help to make the case for this approach.

- **What role can textbooks play in promoting and normalising multilingualism in teaching and learning?**

Textbooks that embrace a multilingual pedagogy and put language and language support at the centre of learning can potentially have a number of positive outcomes:

- They can affirm teachers and build their agency by authorising translanguaging and other multilingual strategies that teachers use, but are currently discouraged from doing so by officials.
- Through representing language use which is more familiar to learners in the authoritative text of a school textbook, these books affirm learners' prior language and identity repertoires.
- They can create many opportunities for learners to listen, speak, read and write while drawing on all the language resources they have, positioning learners as active participants in meaning making and in knowledge access and production.
- They can strengthen the legitimacy of African languages as holders and purveyors of knowledge and can contribute to growing the body of scientific knowledge in African languages.

The programme presenters from Tanzania and Rwanda are hoping that the positive results they are seeing in the research will help to persuade policy makers and other stake holders, of the benefits of multilingual textbooks. This is an exciting example that we in South Africa would do well to follow, given the ongoing failure of our system to provide quality education, access to knowledge and affirmation to all our learners.