
Ubuntu translanguaging as a systematic approach to language teaching in multilingual classrooms in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The Language in Education Policy by the Department of Education recognises the linguistically super-diverse nature of learners in South African schools and provides allowance to use more than one language in teaching and learning within the framework of promoting multilingualism. This policy adopted an additive approach and encouraged school governing bodies to establish how they will promote multilingualism through the use of more than one language. However, it seems there is lack of systematic approaches on how schools should promote multilingualism. This exploratory qualitative study, therefore, looked at how Ubuntu translanguaging can be applied as a systematic approach in schools to promote multilingualism. The small-scale study

made use of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to explore how teachers incorporated and understood the Policy in promoting multilingualism. It was found that teachers used more than one language to enhance learning, though they believed this was not allowed and that they were required/expected to use only one language for learning and teaching at a time. The study concludes that there is a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the Policy and recommends that the policy be unpacked and clarified for teachers. It further recommends the Ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy to be accepted as a systematic approach to promote multilingualism.

Keywords: Additive approach; language policy; multilingualism; translanguaging; Ubuntu translanguaging.

1. Introduction

Globalisation and mobility within and among countries have made the world culturally and linguistically super-diverse (Sefotho & Makalela, 2017) and, therefore, this has become the nature of modern classrooms with learners bringing with them unique and different linguistic repertoires to the classroom. King (2018:4) explains that “Children in most parts of the world grow up with two or more languages available to them, and increasingly ... move to locations where other languages, other than their mother tongue, are the norm”. This creates a situation where learners bring all their linguistic repertoires to school and need to draw from these repertoires to develop academically (Baker, 2011). It has become a norm, nowadays, that learners often use two or more languages in the same environment (Sah, 2018) and, therefore, appropriate approaches need to be considered to include and embrace this linguistic diversity in modern classrooms. The University of Rhode Island views diversity in classrooms as “understanding [that] each student brings unique experiences, strengths, and ideas to our classroom ..., [and therefore views] diversity as the exploration and incorporation of these differences to enrich learning in our classroom” (Kampen, 2019). Language is a tool that constructs and affirms one’s identity and helps people to make sense of their world (Wei, 2018) and schools are expected to value linguistic diversity in bi/multilingual classrooms (Language in Education Policy, 1997: Section 2.3).

Several studies have shown the value of supporting and promoting language diversity in bi/multilingual classrooms across the world (e.g., Baker, 2011; Garcia, 2009; Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Wei, 2017) and in South Africa (e.g., Madiba, 2014; Banda, 2018; Sefotho, 2019), and have recommended and developed teaching and learning approaches that could be used in such classrooms. These researchers noticed that moving between languages, especially in the classroom context, is regarded as unacceptable, inappropriate, as a deficit or dysfunctional mode of interaction, and prohibited by policy (Hurst & Mona, 2017; Probyn, 2009). Probyn, for example, regards it as “smuggling the vernacular into the classroom” (2009, 123). However, research has shown that incorporating several languages in a classroom situation seems not only effective but enhances learning and helps learners become confident and participate more fully in class (Madiba, 2014). These scholars have identified problems with monolingual practices in multilingual classrooms and recommend translanguaging as an effective pedagogy which allows bilingual learners to make use of their linguistic repertoires to enhance learning (Sefotho, 2019). They argue that translanguaging is a “process of developing and utilising the entire language potential of bilingual and monolingual speakers” (Papadopoulos, 2022:423). The aim of the present study was, therefore, to investigate how translanguaging, specifically the Ubuntu translanguaging proposed by Makalela (2016) for use in the African context, could potentially be formally incorporated into language teaching as a systematic approach that could unchain teachers who already use it for practical purposes but who may feel that it is officially regarded as unacceptable. This was done by observing the current practice in teaching language lessons in multilingual classrooms and comparing the

practice with what is stipulated by the South African's Language in Education Policy to promote multilingualism in schools.

South Africa is a linguistically super-diverse country with 11 official languages (Alexander, 2018). Considering so many languages being recognised as official languages implies that South African classrooms are more linguistically diverse than they were in the past and it is common to find learners of different and several linguistic backgrounds in the same class (Banda, 2018; Sefotho, 2019). In support of this diversity, the guidelines for responding to learner diversity in the classroom through Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (2011) further confirm that South African classrooms have rich diversity in the learner population, and that this should be observed and catered for (CAPS, 2011) in order to avoid linguistic discrimination.

The linguistic diversity in South African classrooms requires systems of language education practice that suit the multilingual classroom context. This situation has triggered debate about the teaching approaches that are used to accommodate bi/multilingual learners in classroom settings. For example, Hurst and Mona (2017) argue that teaching approaches and methods used in the country's classrooms have not changed since the colonial period even though post-apartheid language policies have undergone dramatic transformation. These researchers investigated the systems used to accommodate this diversity in South African classrooms. They discovered that, in South Africa, the concurrent use of learners' languages was absent, following the standard international monolingual education norm (McKinney, 2017; Chaka, 2020), which treats languages as separate entities. The reason behind this separation is the belief of cross contamination between languages and that using more than one language creates mental confusion (Jacobson & Faltis, 1990). This separation was also an approach that favoured the apartheid era policy of using education as a tool for discrimination and separation of people, and for suppressing local languages. The Bantu Education Act (1953), for example, imposed on all public schools the exclusive use of either English or Afrikaans as the languages of teaching and learning and did not consider the local languages. Teachers became used to the norm of 'one language at a time' and ignored the diversity of languages reigning in their classrooms. This monolingual norm is inappropriate because it treats languages as separate entities that cannot be used together. There is a need, therefore, for a 'translingual communication' that eradicates boundaries between languages (Makalela, 2016) and a translanguaging pedagogy practice that is better suited to the realities of bi/multilingual classrooms, which would reflect a key principle at the heart of traditional South African culture.

Translanguaging, as a pedagogy, knows no boundaries between or among languages (Sefotho, 2019). The name of this practice is a term that was translated by Baker (2001) from a Welsh term 'trawsieithu', coined by Williams (1994) to refer to a pedagogical practice in which two languages, Welsh and English, were used in the same lesson for reception and production activities (Garcia & Lin, 2016). Learners were allowed to alternate the two languages – they would read a text in Welsh and write a summary of that text in English (Baker, 2001) or vice versa, or a teacher would read a text in English and learners would respond in Welsh

(McKinney & Tyler, 2019; Wei, 2018). This practice was designed to help learners make meaning of what they were doing in their classrooms and to deepen their understanding of concepts (Baker, 2011). It was found not only to promote deeper understanding of the content but also to enhance the acquisition of the weaker or second language (Madiba, 2014).

Based on the theory of translanguaging pedagogy that is designed to deepen understanding and help learners make meaning, the Ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy was developed for the African context (Makalela, 2016). It was based on the African Ubuntu value system of '*motho ke motho ka batho*' (I am because you are and you are because we are). Makalela's contribution was to contextualise translanguaging to fit the African context. He elucidates it as a systematic approach that counters the socially and politically defined boundaries generated by naming, labelling, and separating languages, which had been so strong a feature of the colonial era. He further described Ubuntu translanguaging as a process where there is an overlap between languages and as a model that shows a confluent, fluid and porous existence of language entities, which operate within the logic of '1 x we' (Makalela, 2016:191) and can be used for meaning making to suit any required context. This is an indication, that one language, in a multilingual context, specifically in South African linguistically diverse classrooms, is not complete without others – its completeness depends on the other. To have efficient and effective learning in a bi/multilingual classroom environment, one language can be used to develop proficiency in another language and to enhance understanding.

It is still a challenge how the use of one language for teaching and learning throughout the school day is seen to synchronise with promoting multilingualism through using more than one language. This unclear situation has opened different interpretations, to teachers, of how to use one language of instruction in conjunction with using more than one language to embrace linguistic diversity in the classrooms. However, the position of the Department of Basic Education is that the normal orientation in public schools should be an additive approach to bilingualism (Language in Education Policy, 1996: Section 2(5)). Additive bilingualism happens in a situation where bilinguals add a second language [L2] to what they have already acquired as a first language [L1] without destroying it (Cummins, 2017). In implementing this additive approach, the language of instruction from Grades 1 to 3 is a home language chosen by the school, and from Grade 4 upwards the language of instruction becomes English or Afrikaans. Whether a school uses Afrikaans or English as a language of instruction from Grade 4 and beyond is entirely the school's prerogative. However, the majority of schools use English. Though the Department considers this additive approach as a way of promoting multilingualism, the idea of one language at a time is still treating the two languages as separate entities and in a linear model of one language at a time (L1 [at Foundation phase] + L2 [other phases] = L1 + L2). The additive approach, therefore, brings forth two monolinguals in one individual (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011) and reinforces the idea of one language of learning and teaching at a time. The problem is looking at how teachers put into practice the promotion of multilingualism while applying the additive approach.

This study examined how practical it was for the teachers to embrace learners' diversity by promoting multilingualism through the use of more than one language of learning and teaching. Although Makalela (2016) has suggested the value of applying Ubuntu translanguaging in multilingual classrooms, he has not addressed the practicality of what is or what is not happening in the classroom that could impact on teachers effectively using multiple languages for developing their learners' understanding and conceptualisation. This study did not only investigate the possibility of using Ubuntu translanguaging but also the practicalities of reluctance to accommodate the diversity of languages in multilingual classrooms. The study explored how the principles of this approach might be usefully developed into a proper pedagogical system or a systematic approach that could be used to enhance communication across barriers of languages. Additionally, it looked at how the approach can be directed towards deepening and improving understanding and meaning making and deliberately using the various languages that learners bring to South African multilingual classrooms.

2. Literature

2.1 Translanguaging

As pointed out earlier, translanguaging is a term translated by Baker (2001) from the Welsh term 'trawsieithu', coined by Williams (1994) to refer to a pedagogical practice where two languages, Welsh and English, were used during the same lesson for reception and production activities (Garcia & Lin, 2016). It is a concept that was developed in association with bilingual education where bilingualism was regarded as a resource to allow learners to use their linguistic repertoires. Learners were allowed to alternate the two languages, for example, by reading a text in Welsh and writing a summary of that text in English (Baker, 2001) or vice versa, or a teacher would read a text out loud in English and learners would respond in Welsh (McKinney & Tyler, 2019; Wei, 2018). It was found that using this approach allowed both learners and teachers to apply their linguistics repertoires for problem solving (William, 1994), and the concurrent use of the two languages provided a benefit to the bilingual learners. This approach helped bilingual learners to make meaning of what they were doing in their classrooms and to deepen their understanding of concepts (Baker, 2011). This shows that translanguaging "was not originally intended as a theoretical concept, but a descriptive label for a specific language practice" (Wei, 2018:15) in bi/multilingual settings. In other words, it was not just a theory, but an approach meant for application not only to promote deeper understanding of the content but also to enhance the weaker or second language (Baker, 2011; Garcia & Wei, 2014). It is a pedagogy that removes boundaries between or among languages when learners come to the classroom with knowledge of more than one language (Sefotho, 2019).

The concept of translanguaging has been developing since its initial application in Wales, and linguists have defined it further to clarify its use. For example, it has been defined as a systematic and planned process of incorporating students' linguistic repertoires, which include all the linguistic varieties and socio-cultural practices in the classroom and allows them to move

flexibly between languages (Blackledge & Creese, 2015). It is also viewed as a process of meaning making, where learners are allowed to make use of their languages to construct meaning of their world (Baker, 2011; Mazak & Herbas-Donoso, 2015). It is further considered as a systematic approach that counters the socially and politically defined boundaries of the names and labels of languages (Otheguy, Garcia & Reid, 2015, Wei, 2017), and regards the knowledge of more than one language as a resource from which learners can benefit (Garcia & Lin, 2016; Maseko & Mkhize, 2019; Wei & Lin, 2019). Several concepts, including Ubuntu translanguaging (Makalela, 2016), emerged from translanguaging to represent ways in which people use languages.

2.2 Ubuntu translanguaging

The Ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy – sometimes referred to as multilingualism – is a translanguaging framework that was based on the African Ubuntu value system of ‘*motho ke motho ka batho*’ (‘I am because you are; you are because we are’) (Makalela, 2016). This implies that one human being is not complete without others and that one language is not complete on its own but depends on other languages to be complete. This pedagogy presents language not as an isolated entity but as a representation of people’s cultures and complex repertoires, which are used for meaning making to suit a context (Makalela, 2016). Makalela considered the multilingual situation in sub-Saharan Africa and argued that there has always been a notion of plurality with African people. He points out that divisions of languages were never an issue for African people. He analysed the pre-colonial historical past and found that “various ethnic or tribal communities created a language continuum which was enabling for deeper thoughts that ushered in civilization in the area” (2016:188). He identified Ubuntu translanguaging as “a process in which languages overlap in four ways (vertical flow, incompleteness, interdependence, and horizontal flow), and in which languages are interwoven in a system of infinite dependent relations that recognise no boundaries between them” (Makalela, 2019: 238).

In South African classrooms, the use of various learners’ languages has not been practised even though the Language in Education Policy encourages multilingualism; languages are still treated as separate entities using the monolingual norm of ‘one language at a time’ (Hurst and Mona, 2017). This approach does not seem to acknowledge the complexity of super-diverse languages in multilingual classrooms (Portolés & Martí, 2017), nor to accommodate it in ways that promote multilingualism. The questions that guided this study were (1) How and when do teachers use more than one language in their teaching to promote multilingualism? and (2) for what purpose do teachers use or not use more than one language in their teaching? The study, therefore, investigated how teachers implemented the use of more than one language in class and further explored the possibilities of the Ubuntu translanguaging pedagogy to be incorporated as a systematic approach that can be practiced to promote multilingualism in the classroom.

3. Methodology

This study followed a small-scale exploratory qualitative research design. This design seeks to refine or explain a process that is known and show how that makes sense within the context where it is applied (Reiter, 2017). Reiter further explains exploratory research as a process of the expansion of knowledge and of increasing awareness of a particular theory. In this study, this design was found relevant because it allowed the researcher to elucidate the genesis and development of a phenomenon (Hunter et al., 2019). It further allowed the researcher to explore and contextualise how teachers were making use of more than one language in their daily teaching and learning. It assisted the researcher to explore the possibilities of Ubuntu translanguaging as a new approach in promoting multilingualism.

4. Research site

To contextualise the issue of bi/multilingualism, the study took place at two randomly selected bilingual public schools in Soweto, an over-populated township in South Africa's economic heartland, with people who speak diverse languages. Most learners in this location can speak more than one language fluently and use different languages relatively well depending on the context. The two schools at which the research took place were considered bilingual, owing to the use of the two main languages, English as first additional language (FAL) and Sesotho as home language (HL), chosen by the school, even though most learners had knowledge of languages other than these two languages. The focus of this study was on the two languages only, hence, the reference to these schools as bilingual primary schools.

5. Population and sampling

In all public primary schools in South Africa, two main languages are considered as languages of teaching and learning: a home language (HL) and a first additional language (FAL). For the present study, the selected schools were those that considered Sesotho as a HL and language of instruction from Grade 1 to Grade 3, and English as an additional language and language of instruction from Grade 4 upwards. After a purposive sampling of the primary schools that used English as FAL and Sesotho as HL in Soweto, the two for this study were randomly selected. The participants for this study were four language teachers, who were purposively selected as English and Sesotho language teachers for Grade 5 learners. Grade 5 was chosen as it is taught a year after Grade 4, which is the transition Grade to the new LOLT, where learners are expected to have a good understanding of the language of instruction. The participants were randomly selected from four senior and experienced language teachers in these schools, who were purposively selected as English and Sesotho language teachers for Grade 5 learners; two of them, Solomon and Liberty, taught Sesotho and two, Mary and Patience, taught English. The aim of the study was to find out how teachers applied the Language in Education Policy together with the promotion of multilingualism by making use of learners' linguistic resources in teaching language subjects. The learners who were observed were those in Grade 5 who

were regarded as bilinguals, with Sesotho as their HL and English as their FAL as per the school's curriculum. Grade 5 was chosen as a middle class in the intermediate phase, whose learners had started using English as a medium of instruction from Grade 4. The expectation at this level was that they had been exposed to English as a language of teaching for at least one year and had become used to the transition.

6. Data collection methods and analysis

The two methods of data collection used in this study were observations and interviews. Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were conducted to find out how and why Grade 5 language teachers made use of more than one language for learning and teaching during the English and Sesotho lessons in bilingual classroom settings. Classroom observations were conducted twice in each classroom to observe how Grade 5 teachers put into practice the promotion of multilingualism by using more than one language and by including learners' linguistic repertoires in their teaching during the English and Sesotho lessons to bilingual learners. These observations were guided by observation protocols that assisted the researcher to understand the practical teaching approaches that were applied in multilingual classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to find out why they used or did not use more than one language during the same lesson. The questions were structured to gather information on how, when, and why teachers used more than one language in their teaching. These interviews also served as a follow-up to clarify what took place during the classroom observations. This allowed the teachers to provide further explanation of the data collected during the observations. The required ethical clearance protocols (2014ECE017D) were followed, and informed consent was granted by all the affected participants before data collection. Data were analysed qualitatively, using thematic content analysis to identify themes that emerged from both the observations and interviews.

7. Findings

The discussion of the findings will commence with classroom observations to explain how the teachers' used multilingualism in their teaching. Furthermore, the extent to which teachers allow their learners to use various languages will also be discussed. The findings for the interviews will be presented according to the three themes which emerged: comprehension, vocabulary, and language boundaries. In the presentation of the findings, the participants are given pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity.

7.1 Observations

During the observations, it was discovered that all the four teachers used about 95% of the language of the lesson that they were teaching and 5% of another language where they felt a need for clarification. During English lessons, for example, teacher Mary and teacher Patience would use English but moved to Sesotho when they saw that learners were not responding or

were showing lack of understanding of what was being taught. This move was done very briefly, and they would then revert to the language of teaching. When it was time for the Sesotho lesson, teacher Solomon and teacher Liberty used only Sesotho for teaching but at some point, would explain the concepts in English to clarify words or expressions that seemed unclear to the learners.

The engagement of learners showed that they understood better when the two languages were used concurrently. The teachers understood that the use of more than one language improved learners' comprehension, but they were evidently reluctant to move between languages during the lessons. I also discovered that teachers did not allow their learners to use any other language except the language that was being used in the lessons. In a case where a learner tried to answer in English during a Sesotho lesson, teacher Liberty reminded learners clearly that during the Sesotho lesson they should use only Sesotho. The same thing was done by teacher Solomon, who explained some concepts in English for the learners to understand some Sesotho terms that were not clear to the learners, but immediately reminded learners to use Sesotho during the Sesotho lesson. At the beginning of one English lesson, teacher Mary reminded learners that they should remember that it was time for an English lesson and should only use English when answering questions or communicating amongst themselves during the lesson. This was an indication of a monoglossic ideology of 'one language at a time', in which learners were obliged to respond to questions only in the language that was being used.

The findings from the interviews supported this observation of movement between languages by all the four teachers and not by the learners. Some of the teachers confirmed that they used more than one language to clarify certain concepts to the learners, but not the other way round. As a result, participation by learners was limited during the lessons, especially during the English lessons. This was confirmed by the English teachers during the interviews, where they acknowledged that learners participated better when concepts were explained in more than one language.

7.2 Interviews

The teachers were asked to comment on why they used or did not use more than one language in their teaching and on whether they allowed learners to use their different languages during lessons. Three key themes emerged: learners' meaning making and comprehension, their development of vocabulary in the target language, and language boundaries.

7.2.1 Meaning making & comprehension

All the teachers reported that the use of more than one language helped promote comprehension and meaning making during the lessons. For example, Teacher Solomon explained how the use of both languages in a single lesson improved learners' understanding of what they read and helped them to make meaning out of the text:

I think the use of both languages can improve learners' reading because reading is not only the matter of reciting the letters, but it goes further to understanding the meaning of whatever the person is reading and being able to express oneself.

Teacher Mary, in an English lesson, also supported the view that, when teaching English, she had to explain some concepts in Sesotho to help learners understand what was being taught or else learners would not be able to grasp the meaning of the lesson, but she was not comfortable in doing so as she thought this practice was not permitted:

I have to be comfortable in using English because I am an English teacher; it is not a matter of choice. Well, I sometimes have to use Sesotho when teaching to help my learners understand what I am teaching but that is not allowed.

This statement reveals that Teacher Mary also felt that using English together with the learners' language when teaching bilingual learners was helpful as it helped them to understand better what was taught. She pointed out that sometimes she found she had to use learners' home language to help them make meaning of what was being taught or discussed. She also indicated her belief that teachers were not allowed to engage a different language in a lesson in which they were using English. It showed her understanding that language classes were still meant to be based on the monolingual biased notion of one language at a time (Hurst & Mona, 2017, Sefotho, 2019). It could also indicate a misinterpretation of the language policy, which stipulates that "the school will promote multilingualism through using more than one language of learning and teaching" (1997, 6(1)). This gives teachers the latitude to use more than one language at a time for learning and teaching.

7.2.2 Developing the vocabulary of the target language

The interviews confirmed the teachers' views that the use of more than one language of learning and teaching at a time helps promote the development of vocabulary and understanding of the target language. Teacher Patience indicated that she needed to use Sesotho terms to explain some English concepts that were not clear to the learners, to assist them not only to understand what was being discussed but also to learn new words in the English language:

To be honest, even when teaching English, you sometimes have to use the home language so that they can understand, even though it is not allowed. Most of the time you have to use both languages, otherwise learners would not be able to understand. It is an advantage to know both languages because you use one to learn terms in the other.

This teacher explained the benefit to learners when both languages are used. Her comment echoes what Sah (2018: 9) explains when he points out that teachers use L1 to "enhance the students' comprehension since learners with a lower level of proficiency in L2 struggled to understand lessons". The interview with Teacher Patience reflected her view that the use of

more than one language not only enhances comprehension but also develops learners' vocabulary especially of the target English language. Elashhab (2020) also reported similar findings when she observed teachers asking learners to use Arabic words equivalent to English words being used to confirm their vocabulary and their comprehension of English concepts.

7.2.3 Non-recognition of language boundaries pedagogy

A further theme that emerged from the interviews was the understanding that language boundaries did not have to be adhered to in the classroom, but needed rather needed broken for better learning to take place, as Teacher Liberty explained:

These two languages play a crucial role because they integrate. You cannot use Sesotho without using English, even use English without referring to Sesotho, so that the learners can understand. Reading requires understanding and to help learners understand you have to use all the languages that they know. Sometimes you have to explain some English concepts in Sesotho to make learners understand what you are talking about or explain some Sesotho words in English.

In support of the same view, Teacher Solomon also indicated that even when teaching Sesotho, English should be used to explain Sesotho concepts that learners do not understand, even though the terms are in their home language. He pointed out that

... there are certain Sesotho words that our learners do not know or understand, and we have to use English to explain those terms and they will understand better.

This confirmed that boundaries between languages can be crossed for better understanding in bilingual classrooms.

The comments from the two teachers confirmed their awareness that the two languages cannot and should not be separated, as one language is helpful as a means for explaining concepts in another. They pointed out that drawing from Sesotho when using English, or from English when using Sesotho, is crucial for developing the comprehension of learners. Their statements reveal the benefits of taking advantage of all the languages that learners know in order to further their understanding. In other words, the teachers were aware that there are, in a sense, no boundaries between the two languages being used and that the two languages complement each other (Garcia, 2011, Sefotho, 2019, Wei, 2018). They made it clear that knowledge of the two is advantageous to bilingual learners as it enables them to move flexibly from one language to another and to use any language they know appropriately in particular situations where there is a need to do so.

In general, during the interviews, teachers claimed that they used both languages in order to enhance understanding of difficult concepts, and that using one at a time was not enough. However, they often claimed that this practice was not allowed by the Department of Basic Education and that they were not free to move from one language to another during teaching, especially in the teaching of English and other subjects because the stipulated language of

instruction in Grade 5 was English. The Language in Education Policy (1996) states that the language of instruction from Grades 1 to 3 is a home language chosen by the school, and from Grade 4 upwards the language of instruction becomes English. They argued that languages complement each other and, in practice, must be used together to enhance learning, as it was a problem for most of their learners to understand what was being taught in one language. However, the learners found it easier when concepts were explained in the language they understood. Their position corresponded with the principle underpinning Ubuntu translanguaging, that one language is incomplete without the other: “I am because you are and you are because I am” (Sefotho, 2019).

8. Discussion

The findings from both the observations and interviews revealed that the teachers had experienced the advantages of using both languages in bilingual classrooms to improve learning. This was especially the case where English was an additional language and where most of their learners had difficulty understanding what was being taught. The teachers explained how using more than one language concurrently improved learners’ participation in the classroom, and it was evident that their practice was leaning towards that associated with Ubuntu translanguaging. For example, they used more than one language during their teaching, when necessary, as specified by the application of this pedagogy. They did so reluctantly, however, as they believed the policy did not allow it. Their comments reflected feelings that they were ‘smuggling’ vernacular languages into the classroom (Probyn, 2009:123). They thought that, since only one language of learning and teaching had been specified, they should use it consistently without incorporating any other language, so they did not apply the approach systematically.

As teachers, they used both languages to enhance learners’ understanding of difficult concepts but did not allow their learners to do the same, though they saw a need to apply a pedagogical approach that benefits learners in multilingual classrooms (Charamba & Sano, 2019). This reluctance to allow their learners to translanguage suggests that they were still trying to adhere to the monoglossic ideology of ‘one language at a time’. Perhaps they did so in order to avoid ‘cross-contamination’ and confusion (Jacobson & Faltis, 1990), or maintain the standard understanding that using one language, especially the target language, on its own develops proficiency in the language.

Nevertheless, the teachers used both languages to facilitate learning and to help learners comprehend better especially in the target language where Sesotho is used to clarify English concepts. This confirms that their use of the L1 assisted bilingual learners in understanding and relating meaning of difficult concepts in the L2 (Sah, 2018). It also confirms that translanguaging benefits bilinguals in enabling them to move from one language to another whenever there is a need. Some teachers specified their belief that it becomes easy for learners to understand concepts if all the languages they know are being used. They argued that both languages complemented each other and ought to be used together to enhance learning – using

one on its own is not enough. This point echoes the Ubuntu translanguaging framework in which Makalela (2016) upholds the view that all languages complement each other and applies even in the classroom environment; no language in a bilingual setting is complete without the other, and one language develops the other (Sefotho, 2019) as boundaries are collapsed between the two. Thierry (2016) supports this view, arguing that it is not possible to draw a line between the languages, as there is no specific region for a particular language in the mind, and expressing his belief that the view that there are boundaries between languages in a bilingual person does not make sense at all.

The findings in this study show that the teachers believed in using all the linguistic resources of the learners in the classroom, but that they lacked understanding on how to incorporate this practice into their application of the South African Language in Education Policy, which allows multilingualism in teaching. This led the teachers to fear the potential impermissibility of using one language to assist in teaching another, indicating that ‘it is not allowed’. It can be concluded, therefore, that the Language in Education Policy needs to be unpacked in order to help teachers understand what it entails, and interpret it accurately, use the learners’ various languages without anxiety and embrace diversity in their classrooms. Furthermore, schools could be reminded of their right and responsibility to “stipulate how ...[they] will promote multilingualism using more than one language of learning and teaching” (Department of Education, 1997). The study – although small-scale in nature – reveals the potential advantage of empowering teachers further, to embrace diversity and recognise (via their own practice) the insight that allowing the use of more than one language in the same lesson can benefit not only the learners but the teachers as well.

9. Recommendations and conclusion

This study calls for changes in the training of teachers to capacitate them with ways to deal with teaching in bi/multilingual contexts. This would involve the use of practical and relevant models of teaching, customised to suit the South African multilingual school context (Makalela, 2018) and based on a clear understanding of the Language in Education Policy. The study further recommends exploring the possibility of incorporating Ubuntu translanguaging as a systematic approach to promote bi/multilingualism in the classroom, given that the practice is so closely aligned to the language principles enshrined in South Africa’s constitution, and that it supports approaches that teachers seem already to have started to use. Chaka (2020) views it as a humanising pedagogy and a prominent practice that “runs counter the classical colonial monolingual theorisation” (28) and could be useful mainly to disadvantaged learners. Incorporating this approach in a formal and systematic way, to tap into all the linguistic resources available in bi/multilingual classrooms could be an important way forward to enhance learning and teaching, in bilingual language classrooms and more broadly.

10. References

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