



## 'Smuggling the vernacular into the classroom': conflicts and tensions in classroom codeswitching in township/rural schools in South Africa

Margie Probyn

**To cite this article:** Margie Probyn (2009) 'Smuggling the vernacular into the classroom': conflicts and tensions in classroom codeswitching in township/rural schools in South Africa, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 12:2, 123-136, DOI: [10.1080/13670050802153137](https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050802153137)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050802153137>



Published online: 30 Mar 2009.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3818



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 33 [View citing articles](#) [↗](#)

## **‘Smuggling the vernacular into the classroom’: conflicts and tensions in classroom codeswitching in township/rural schools in South Africa**

Margie Probyn\*

*Faculty of Education, University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X19, Bellville, Cape Town, 7535, South Africa*

In South Africa, as in many parts of postcolonial Africa, English dominates the political economy and as a result is the medium of instruction chosen by the majority of South African schools, despite the fact that most learners do not have the opportunity to acquire English to the levels necessary for effective engagement with the curriculum. Where teachers and learners share a common home language, there is frequently a gap between language policy and practice, and codeswitching by teachers and learners is a common strategy to achieve a range of social and pedagogical goals. However, in teachers’ training the multilingual realities of the classroom have most often been framed in terms of a linguistic problem, with a deficit view of codeswitching. As a result, the potential to use two languages in the classroom in a structured and systematic way to support learning has not been generally recognised or developed. In addition, codeswitching practices are often covert with teachers ‘smuggling the vernacular into the classroom’ and adopting very different linguistic practices when observed, with serious implications for classroom-based research. This paper explores the conflicts and tensions in classroom codeswitching in the context of macrolevel contestations around language status and rights.

**Keywords:** code-switching in classrooms; bilingual education; education in South Africa; language policy and practice; language ecology

### **Introduction**

A class of Grade 8 Xhosa-speaking learners in an ‘English-medium’ rural South African school have completed experiments on magnetism in the previous science lesson and their teacher is reviewing and consolidating key concepts. In the following IRE sequences, the teacher elicits the word ‘attract’ (in the sense of magnetic attraction), by first establishing the concept in the learners’ home language, Xhosa: *iyaztsala*; then eliciting an English everyday language equivalent: ‘pull’; and finally eliciting the English scientific term ‘attract’. In the process he moves between English and Xhosa as he engages the learners in co-constructing understanding in a way that might not be possible if he were only using English.

Extract 1:

1. **Teacher:** When we say iron filings are magnetic what do we mean by that? What does the magnet do to the iron filings? *Izenza ntoni* [what does it do to them]? *Anithethi ngoku* [you are not talking now]. *Uthini* [what are you saying]?

---

\*Email: [mprobyn@uwc.ac.za](mailto:mprobyn@uwc.ac.za)

2. **Learner 1:** *Iyazdibanisa* [it combines them].
3. **Teacher:** Mhmm?
4. **Learner 1:** *Iyazdibanisa* [It combines them].
5. **Teacher:** *Iyaz'thini* [What does it do]?
6. **Learner 1:** *Iyazdibanisa* [It combines them].
7. **Teacher:** *Iyazdibanisa?* [It combines them?] *Andinawthi iyazdibanisa, leliphi elinye igama esinokulisebenzisa* [I would not exactly say combines them, what other term can we use]? *Wena kaloku xa usithi iyazdibanisa, utheth'ba iyazisondelanisa, ne* [When you say it combines them, you mean it brings them closer, don't you]? *Izenza ntoni* [What does it do to them]? *Iyazthini* [It does what to them]? What happens?
8. **Learner 2:** *Iyaztsala* [It pulls them].
9. **Teacher:** *Iyaztsala, iyaztsala* [Pulls them, pulls them].
10. **Teacher:** *Ngesilungu sizak'thi iyazthini kaloku uk'tsala* [In English how are we going to say it pulls]? Mhmm? What can we say in English *iyaz'tsala* [it pulls them]?
11. **Learner 3:** Pull
12. **Teacher:** Pull, pull. It pulls them, heh?
13. **Teacher:** Another word which we can use, *i*-scientific word, *esinokuyisebenzisa, besiyisebenz s'izolo* [that we can use, we used it yesterday]. *Ithini* [It what]? *Kula* [In that] pulling? *Xa usondeza* [When you bring] when you bring. *i- ... i- ... iron filing i- ... i-magnet kwi-iron filings ziyatsaleka andithi* [they get pulled, didn't we say]? *Sathi iyazithini* [What did it do to them]? Which word did we use? *Kokwak'tsala* [For pulling]? (*Calls on learner by name*) *Nokulunga?*
14. **Learner 4:** We put up.
15. **Teacher:** You put up. No, we did not use that word *asisebenzisanga elogama* [we did not use that word]. *Eloqala ngo A* [It starts with A], *Eqala ngo A* [It starts with A]. (*Gesticulates pulling action with hand*) Heh? We said *i*-iron filings *ziyathini* [do what]? *Eqala ngo A* [It starts with A], are what?
16. **Learner 5:** Identify
17. **Teacher:** Identify. *Hayi khona* [No ways]. Not identify. Identify *kaloku besithe, besithe uthini kanene* [remember we said, we said you say ... remember]? *Impawu esibona ngazo ngu ... a-balu-* [The distinguishing characteristic is ... a-what]? Heh? *Itsho* [Speak] (*pointing to learner*).
18. **Learner 6:** Attract
19. **Teacher:** *Heke* [Good], attract, attract. *Besithe kanene kwi-iron filings imagnet iyazithini ezanto* [What did we say iron filings, a magnet does to those things]? Attracts. *Iyayiattracta, naliya elagama* [It attracts it, there is the word]. Attracts, he?
20. **Learners:** Yees

Codeswitching practices such as the above are a feature of many South African classrooms where teachers and learners share a common home language, while the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is English. Although many teachers are able to utilise the linguistic resources of the classroom in a skilled and responsive way, to achieve a range of cognitive and affective teaching and learning goals, codeswitching is not generally accepted as a legitimate classroom strategy, nor has it been sanctioned in teacher training; hence a teacher referred to 'smuggling the vernacular into the classroom' (Probyn 2001) (see also Adendorff 1996; Macdonald 1990; National Education Policy Investigation 1992; Setati et al. 2002).

In any bilingual classroom where the LoLT is not the home language of the learners, teachers are faced with the twin goals of content and language teaching and the inevitable tension between these two goals (Wong-Fillmore 1986). In the South African context, as in many postcolonial countries, where a former colonial language is used as medium of instruction (for examples see Arthur 1994 in Botswana; Lin

1996 in Hong Kong; Martin 1996 in Brunei; Merrit 1992 in Kenya; Ndayipfukamiye 1994 in Burundi), these tensions are exacerbated by the poor English proficiency of many learners and as Macdonald (1990, 44) notes, the teacher's classroom practice is moulded by the language proficiency of the learners. So although the majority of schools opt for English LoLT for a range of reasons to be discussed, in many classrooms there is in fact a contradiction between school language policy and what is possible in practice – a situation that is a further source of tension for teachers. Thus, as Martin-Jones (1995, 90) observes in other contexts, the study of codeswitching in South African classrooms is intertwined with ongoing debates about language policy.

Given that learners' poor proficiency in the language of teaching, learning and testing has obvious negative consequences for their academic achievement, and that the Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) (Department of Education 1997) in fact encourages schools to teach through the medium of the learners' home language, an obvious question might be why schools continue to opt for English as LoLT. This apparent paradox reflects macrolevel contestations around language rights and practices that are a feature of South Africa's ongoing political transformation. This paper seeks to explore some of the conflicts and tensions inherent in classroom language practices and the consequences for access and equity for the majority of learners. The focus of this paper is on township<sup>1</sup> and rural (formerly African) schools, which accommodate the majority of learners today and where most frequently teachers and learners share a common African home language.<sup>2</sup>

### **Historical–political–economic context**

South Africa is a multilingual country with 11 official languages recognised in the democratic Constitution of 1996 (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996): the former colonial languages of English and Afrikaans, which were the two official languages prior to 1996, to which have been added nine African languages (see Table 1).

Language attitudes are highly politicised as there is a long history of language policies being used as instruments of political coercion and oppression: the English colonial government (1854–1910) followed a policy of 'Anglicisation' that denied Afrikaners the right to learn through the medium of their home language, an issue that became a rallying point for Afrikaner politics. Later, under the Afrikaner-dominated Nationalist government (1948–1994), the policies of apartheid were based on ethnolinguistic identity and segregation: over 80% of the land was owned by the white minority and 'homeland'<sup>3</sup> areas, amounting to about 14% of the land, were set aside on the rural peripheries where black South Africans who were not formally employed in 'white' South Africa were forced to live. By contrast, the African National Congress's 'Freedom Charter'<sup>4</sup> (ANC 1955) emphasised non-racialism and a common South African identity.

Apartheid legislation included separate schools for English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites and the notorious system of separate and inferior 'Bantu Education' for African students (also separated according to home language). School language policies for African schools extended mother tongue medium of instruction from Grade 4 to the end of Grade 8 and in 1976 attempts by the Nationalist government to enforce Afrikaans as the medium of instruction for half the curriculum (alongside English) in African secondary schools, sparked off the student-led Soweto Uprising,

Table 1. Census 1996 in Statistics South Africa, 2000.

Official languages (from 1996)	Home language speakers (%)
Zulu (Nguni)	23
Xhosa (Nguni)	18
Afrikaans	14
Sepdi (Sotho)	9
English	9
Setswana (Sotho)	8
SeSotho (Sotho)	8
Xitsonga	4
SiSwati (Nguni)	3
Tshivenda	2
IsiNdebele (Nguni)	2

Note: Percentages have been rounded off. Seven of the nine official African languages fall into two language ‘clusters’ i.e. ‘a set of varieties that are closely related along linguistic lines’, namely the Nguni cluster and the Sotho cluster (Mesthrie 2002: 11).

which rapidly spread to the rest of the country and marked the beginning of nearly two decades of political struggle, much of it based in schools. Thus the concept of home language medium of instruction for African learners has been fatally tainted by its association with apartheid education language policies; and the attempts to impose Afrikaans as medium of instruction in 1976 only served to entrench attitudes in favour of English (see Hartshorne 1992).

#### **Language status and policies post-1994**

Under apartheid, the relative powers of English and Afrikaans were held in some kind of balance: English dominated the economy while Afrikaans held sway in politics. In the decade preceding the democratic elections of 1994 and during the constitutional negotiations that followed, language activists lobbied for the development and elevation of the status of African languages, including an increased role for African languages as media of instruction in schools, on both pedagogical and political grounds. This resulted in the already mentioned constitutional recognition of 11 official languages and a LiEP (Department of Education 1997) that advocates (but does not mandate) an increased role for learners’ home languages as media of instruction.

However, despite these measures, since 1994 and the re-entry of South Africa into the global economy, English has in fact gained in power and status at the cost of Afrikaans and African languages also appear to have lost ground, judging by the drastic reduction in student numbers studying African languages at tertiary level (Wright 2002). Although African languages are valued as languages of ‘home and hearth’, and are widely spoken within urban townships and cities, and operate as *lingua franca*s at regional levels, English dominates the political economy today (see Wright 2002) and is perceived as the language of upward mobility and access: as a primary school teacher stated bluntly ‘English puts bread on the table’ (Probyn et al. 2002).

In terms of the LiEP, the responsibility for decisions about school language policies are devolved down to School Governing Bodies – made up of parent, teacher and student representatives. It appears that at this level, popular opinion runs counter to policy intentions: small-scale research studies have shown that where schools have made formal policy decisions (very few have) or where changes have been made to informal language policies, the shifts have been towards introducing English as LoLT

even earlier than before, rather than extending learners' grounding in their home language, as advocated by the LiEP (Probyn et al. 2002). Generally the language policies in African schools are that by the beginning of the 'Intermediate Phase' i.e. Grade 4, but often even from Grade 1, the chosen LoLT is English, with the learners' home language being studied as a subject to Grade 12. These policies reflect language attitudes and aspirations and practical constraints rather than pedagogical realities.

The pedagogical reasons advanced in the LiEP for home language LoLT are based on theories of second language acquisition and learning, in particular the notion of 'additive bilingualism', with a thorough conceptual grounding in the learners' home languages providing the basis for later learning through an additional language (Heugh 1995; Lockett 1995). However, these theories are not widely understood outside academia and are somewhat counterintuitive; and popular opinion tends to conflate acquiring English with 'time on task' and learning through the medium of English (NEPI 1992).

As in other Anglophone countries, English has accrued status as the language of learning as a result of the influence of colonial mission schools (Pennycook 1994, 261), while the notion of African language medium of instruction remains tainted by its association with apartheid education.

In addition, teachers in township schools perceive that African parents are sending their children to formerly white schools to learn English and so feel under pressure to counter this flow by offering English as LoLT as early as possible in the hope of retaining learners and, thus, teaching posts (Probyn et al. 2002).

Further practical constraints on African language LoLT are claims by teachers that African languages lack the necessary terminology for subject teaching; and the fact that there is a lack of African language textbooks beyond Grade 3 as publishers are naturally reluctant to commission textbooks in African languages without a guaranteed market.

Thus for a range of reasons that have little to do with effective learning in the classroom, African schools have opted for an early introduction of English as LoLT, despite the recommendations of the LiEP.

### **Problems with English acquisition**

Very many learners living outside the urban centres do not acquire the threshold level of English proficiency to be able to effectively engage with the curriculum and increasingly proficiency in English is replacing race as a marker of social class (Soudien 2004). Regional African languages are widely spoken at home and community levels and are frequently the informal lingua francas in township and rural schools, so learners have little exposure to English outside the classroom. Under apartheid, African schools were grossly under-resourced (Hartshorne 1992) and many, particularly in rural areas, remain so (Bot and Shindler 1997; *Emerging Voices* 2005). Although the new government is committed to social and economic transformation, including educational access and equity for all learners, the legacy of apartheid is such that 83% of schools still do not have libraries (Bot and Shindler 1997, 80–1) or adequate reading resources. High levels of poverty and unemployment and related low literacy levels of learners' caregivers (frequently pensioned grandparents in rural areas)<sup>5</sup> mean that there is little home support for literacy development.

As a consequence, there is frequently a gap between the desired school language policy and what is possible in classroom practice. So it happens, as noted by Ball (1994)

in other contexts, that policy is reshaped and remade as it is enacted at various levels in the system: national policy is reinterpreted at school level according to popular opinion and practical constraints; and reinterpreted again when it is enacted at classroom level; and at each level there is a gap between policy intentions and policy enactment.

### **Tensions and conflicts in classroom language practices**

Classrooms are the places where the tensions and conflicts around language policy and practice are most acutely experienced and teachers are faced with complex dilemmas that are both pedagogical and political. Teachers are caught between community aspirations and classroom realities: the desire of parents and learners to access English as a way out of the poverty trap and the paradox that English as LoLT in fact creates a barrier to learning and academic success. Codeswitching is both a response to and a source of these tensions and conflicts. The following quotations from teachers help to illustrate some of their dilemmas (Setati et al. 2002), and are drawn from four small-scale research studies, one of which is still to be completed (Probyn 1995, 2001, 2006a).

Teachers recognise their dual responsibilities as teachers of content and teachers of language and are caught in the tension between these two goals:

We have to be tactical somewhere, weigh the two. They must understand English . . . so that they can express themselves but the problem again, they have to understand what you are actually teaching them, the content, so somewhere, somehow, you have to weigh this . . . (Accounting teacher)

A mathematics teacher observed that using the learners' mother tongue 'might help them understand the concept, do their mathematics, but then it is also killing their English'. If students answered in mother tongue, she felt she should force them to speak English but she was also happy if they could give her the correct answer in their mother tongue. She observed: 'It's hard to strike the balance'.

A history teacher noted that although he was aware of the need to help learners improve their English, this was time-consuming and conflicted with his obligation to complete the history syllabus. He was aware that some learners were getting left behind but felt powerless to remedy the situation – a stressful situation for any teacher. He noted:

Sometimes you end up having that feeling or thought, though it's sad, and say that, 'Okay, it's just a few of these students who will make it. Some of them are just unfortunate'. So you learn to live with the situation of knowing that there is something which you cannot help in the classroom, though you are a teacher. (History teacher)

The stresses of the teaching situation were also revealed in the terms teachers used to describe teaching a content subject through the medium of English: dragging, pulling, hooking; 'We have to take them, you know pull them, pull them from the mother tongue to the foreign language, introduce them, gradually, gradually' (accounting teacher); '(I) negotiate a foundation of understanding (in Xhosa) . . . Now that I find that they can say a thing, then I'm moving to English again, dragging them in English . . . now I feel I need to drag them on' (history teacher); and:

No, I don't think I say, 'I'd better use their mother-tongue'. I would have loved to be speaking English right through. But then at the back of my mind, I know I'm not reaching everyone here. And at some point then I have to hook them up. I must make

sure that they're with me. And I don't even know who I'm reaching to. But then I know that I have that other audience which is not with me. (Mathematics teacher)

Teachers recognised that learning through the medium of a poorly acquired additional language was stressful for learners:

And sometimes they feel so inferior when you ask them always in English because they are afraid to answer as soon as you mention it. So if you are not using the first language, you find that the classroom is tense, they don't know to express themselves, but they will get difficulty at the end of the year because they are unable to use the proper words. (Biology teacher)

Teachers recognised that learners' poor proficiency in English contributed to high failure rates: 'What I've realised, they fail (examinations) because of the language problem. They understand what is being asked but they can't express themselves in English' (business economics teacher).

A history teacher referred to learners' alienation from the subject matter and that that the lack of subject terminology in the students' mother tongue made them feel that '... you have not had any contribution to civilisation'. He elaborated:

You would find that education is alienating for the students, ... or even myself ... because the fact that we do not have terms for this and that, it means that this is something which is done by people who are foreign and therefore we do not show any willingness to come closer to an understanding of that (subject). (History teacher)

Language use in the classroom is also closely tied to issues of language loyalty and cultural identity. Some learners and teachers expressed ambivalence towards English: they recognised its instrumental value but were concerned that their home language and culture was being eroded by English: a learner wrote that he would prefer to learn through the medium of Xhosa: *uobangela kuba a(n) dinokuthi ndingumxhosa ndifune ukugika ndithethe isngesi ngoba ndingumxhosa ngesobe ndijike ndisiyasithanda isixhosa neezinto zakwaxha isixhosa lulwimi lam kwaye* (the reason is that being a Xhosa speaker, it is not easy to change now into an English speaker; I love Xhosa with its culture and traditions and it is my language.) Another learner wrote: *unobangela ndiyasiva kune English ndicacelwe sisiXhosa kweye simnandi isiXhosa kum ngaphezu kweEnglish* (because I understand it better than English, I am clear with isiXhosa and it is more lovely and wonderful than English.) The history teacher said that ideally students should learn through their mother tongue, but because of financial constraints, 'I soon realise that okay this might sound foolish and unrealistic perhaps; it cannot happen. So there's no other way, except for one option, that they must all get involved in English, they must learn to marry with English'.

As teachers and learners generally share a common home language, a natural communicative response is for both teachers and learners to codeswitch. However, this has not been sanctioned in teacher training in the past and many teachers regard codeswitching as illicit, a sign of linguistic and pedagogic incompetence, rather than a valid communicative strategy. In interviews teachers commented on codeswitching:

'I must confess it's a bad thing to do';

'... we explain in Xhosa, but in actual fact that is not what is supposed to be done';

'... if there's any wrong, the first wrong would be to find teachers teaching history in Xhosa';

and 'the vernacular was smuggled into the content of the subject ...'



The power of this sanction against codeswitching was demonstrated in a small-scale research study (Probyn 2006a) when two out of six teachers confessed in post-lesson interviews that they had ‘completely changed’ their language use during videotaped lessons as they thought codeswitching was ‘not allowed’ – this despite being videotaped for four successive lessons and repeated assurances by the researcher that they should teach as they normally would. This has obvious implications for the validity of such classroom research.

Several small-scale research studies in township and rural schools suggest that teachers’ classroom language practices vary considerably in terms of how much they codeswitch to the learners’ home language or not (Probyn 2001, 2006a, 2006b). Reasons for this variability appear to lie with differences in particular teachers’ attitudes towards language policy and codeswitching; the attitudes of their school’s principal, teaching staff and parents; the particular teaching contexts and constraints, including the teacher’s own proficiency in English and the language demands of the particular subject.

Nevertheless, where teachers did codeswitch, clear patterns emerged in terms of the rationales they offered for codeswitching and these are remarkably similar to codeswitching patterns reported in similar postcolonial contexts in Africa and Asia (for examples see Arthur 1994 in Botswana; Lin 1996 in Hong Kong; Martin 1996 in Brunei; Merrit 1992 in Kenya; Ndayipfukamiye 1994 in Burundi). It appeared that teachers’ classroom codeswitching falls into two broad categories:

- Teachers find they need to codeswitch from English to Xhosa for cognitive reasons in response to learners’ limited English proficiency.
- Teachers choose to codeswitch from English to Xhosa to achieve various affective goals.

In order to accommodate the language proficiency of learners, teachers tended to teach new terms or concepts in Xhosa first and then transfer the understanding to English – the transcript at the beginning of the paper illustrates this. Teachers tended to rephrase in Xhosa if they saw the learners were not following an exposition or question, either because they seemed not to understand the concept (Extract 2 below, underlined) or because the English syntax was difficult (Extract 3 below, underlined):

Extract 2:

**Teacher:** Now, in using that magnet, what did you consider? *Sijonge ntoni ukuze sisebenzise imagnet, yintoni esiyijongileyo kwezinto zimbini* [What did we test out when we used the magnet, what were we testing in these two things]? What did we consider in these two substances, in order for us to use that magnet, to separate the mixture? *Sijonge intoni yazo* [What was it we looked for in them]? Mhmm? *Sijonge intoni yazo* [What was it we looked for in them]?

Extract 3:

**Teacher:** Right. I would like you now to join in the second bulb there and compare the brightness of the bulb now with the brightness of the bulb before. *Uzakujonga indlek ibulb zakho ezi lighter ngayo ngoku, ne. Uzicompare nangokuya ibulb ibinye* [You are going to look at the way the bulbs will light now and compare them to that one bulb].

Teachers claimed to be guided by the learners' expressions, which they monitored closely: 'I can feel the class and when I look at them, I can see these kids don't understand, so you have to change (language), you have to make them understand' (science teacher). Teachers were careful to ensure that learners were not left behind or that the teacher did not seem to be favouring those who were proficient in English: '(so that it does not seem that) I'm moving with one side of the class, those who are better able to understand the language' (history teacher).

Teachers also would switch to Xhosa to emphasise a point (Extract 4 below, underlined):

Extract 4:

**Teacher:** Okay, good. Now so that's what we know about bulbs connected in what, in series. Now think, I'm going to ask you something now, please think here, *ne* [okay]? Please think here. (*Softly*) Why do you think bulbs connected in series make the current come smaller? Now remember you had (*indistinct*) you did not change it, *ne* [okay]? *Awukange uyitshinhse* [You did not change it]. Right? *Kodwa qho usongeza umbane, usihla, usihla, usihla* (But if you add (bulbs) all the time, it goes down, it goes down, it goes down). What makes the current to drop all the time when we increase bulbs in series? Huh?

In group work, it appeared that learners routinely discussed questions in their home language but were expected to report to the class or answer questions in English – thus exploratory talk took place in their home language and presentational talk (Barnes 1992) mainly in English. However, if learners had problems answering in English, then teachers generally encouraged them to express their ideas in Xhosa and would either help them to rephrase in English or else call upon another learner to help them do so. In the extended Extract 5 below, the teacher asked a question in Xhosa, then when he did not get any responses, he invited learners to answer in Xhosa (1); a learner gave an answer in Xhosa (2–4) and then the teacher helped the learner to rephrase the statement (5–10) and invited the class to offer help (11). Learners did not get the correct answer and so the teacher supplied it, using the Xhosa word for metal (19) and then translating it into English (20), as he said he did not think they all knew the meaning of the English word 'metal'. He then repeated the word 'metal' six times and used the Xhosa word again, to ensure that learners became familiar with the word and understood its meaning (23).

Extract 5:

1. **Teacher:** *Teta isiXhosa* [Speak isiXhosa] ... Oh I've got some hands up now. Yes (pointing to another learner)?
2. **Learner 1:** *Izakulighter, mfundisi* [The bulb will light, teacher].
3. **Teacher:** The bulb will light. Okay. Why? ... Why? Why?
4. **Learner 1:** *Ngoba la gas uthe nca ecangcini* [Because the wire is stuck to the metal].
5. **Teacher:** Because ... okay try that now in English. Because ... this ... yes ... follow me. This ...
6. **Learner 1:** This ...
7. **Teacher:** This wire ...
8. **Learner 1:** This wire ...

9. **Teacher:** is ...
10. **Learner 1:** is ...
11. **Teacher:** (*Makes circular gesture with hand to class*)
12. **Learner 2:** (*calls out*) is connected
13. **Teacher:** Good, good! Is ...?
14. **Learners:** is connected
15. **Teacher:** Is connected to (*L1 sits down*) ... to the ...
16. **Learners:** cell
17. **Teacher:** To the ... noo to the ... This wire is connected to the (*pointing to diagram on chalkboard then indicates metal on bulb at front of class*) ...?
18. **Learner 3:** (*indistinct*)
19. **Teacher:** To the cangci [Metal]
20. **Learners:** (*laughs loudly because teacher has used Xhosa word*)
21. **Teacher:** Nooo. No look here (*pointing bulb*) to the ... metal.
22. **Learners:** Metal
23. **Teacher:** To the metal, to the metal here (*indistinct*). Good, good, good, good! Icangci [Metal] to the metal. So the whole of this metal, the whole of this metal here conducts electricity. So no matter where you put the ... no matter where you put the wire, as long as this wire is connected you know to these (*indicating on bulb*) ... the metal outside here. Then the current of electrical energy will light up.

Teachers also tended to codeswitch for a range of purposes which related more to learners' affective rather than cognitive needs. Many teachers reported using the learners' home language for classroom management. For example a mathematics teacher started her lessons with 'Masiqalaseeni, bantu' [Let us begin, people] and explained: 'I am appealing to them. All of them are now going to focus.' A history teacher also talked about codeswitching as a strategy he used to engage learners: '... you negotiate their cooperation'. Teachers commonly codeswitched to discipline students: 'They respond to you more if you say it in Xhosa' (science teacher) (see Extract 6 below).

Extract 6:

(A commotion breaks out in one group, as the teacher is conducting the post-practical discussion)

**Teacher:** Heh? What's happening? *Kwenza ntoni* [What's happening]? (*Walks over to check*)

**Learner:** *Amanzi achithiwe tishara* [Water has been spilled, teacher]

**Teacher:** *Nenza ntoni ngoku* [What are you doing now]? ... *Sanuba ngamaxelengu maan* [Do not be untidy, man]. *Iphi nto yosula* [Where is something to wipe this spill]? *Khaboleki laphu* [Borrow a cloth]. *Uzenzumntanomcinci* [Do not behave like small child]!

Xhosa was also used to gain and hold learners' attention, for example with question tags such as 'ne' (not so)? and 'andithi' (didn't we say so)? In order to reduce the alienation of the subject matter, teachers tended to codeswitch when quoting examples from learners' own experience (see Extract 7 below): A teacher explained: 'And I think also its sometimes necessary to use the first language to talk to them because sometimes you associate something which you did it in class with what he has experienced outside; so its easy for them to understand' (biology teacher).

Extract 7:

**Teacher:** We call it residue. *Enye iredidue oyaziyo yileya uyisebenzisa kusasa xa unkinkisha iti* [The other residue you know is when you make tea in the morning]

Teachers all tended to do what they described as ‘Xhosalise’ i.e. add Xhosa prefixes to English terms e.g. *i*-carbon-dioxide, *i*-cell. Teachers claimed this was largely unconscious but it seems very likely that it constituted an effort to appropriate the terminology and reduce the alienation of the subject matter. In addition, several teachers attempted to reduce the stress of learning through a second language by switching to the learners’ home language – when speaking to groups or individuals, or when making jokes. A mathematics teacher explained:

And usually when they are working individually now, there’s a lot of interacting in their mother tongue. When they are individually working in their books, now I’m not presenting the lesson any more. I’m now like the mother at home. Now I’m supposed to be relaxed. And this is how it becomes-relaxed. I would then be speaking in their mother tongue.

I like to relate what I teach with their real life events and in a way I will be cracking a joke, clearing the air, making them laugh. And usually I will do that in my mother tongue. (Mathematics teacher)

Codeswitching was not the only strategy used by teachers to support learning: they also repeated key terms and concepts, spoke more slowly, used gesture and voice tone to support communication; consolidated concepts on the chalkboard, related ideas to learners’ own experiences, and in the case of science, used demonstrations and analogies.

Despite the tensions and conflicts in classroom language use, several experienced teachers were able to negotiate understanding with learners by utilising the linguistic resources of the classroom in a manner that was finely tuned to the needs of the learners (see also Probyn 2006a).

## **Conclusion**

Tensions and conflicts in classroom codeswitching are embedded in conflicts and tensions around language policy. Although the LiEP (Department of Education 1997) seeks to address problems caused by learning through an additional language by advocating learning through the learners’ home language, in fact the political and practical constraints are such that these recommendations have not been followed by school governing bodies.

Thus language in education, combined with continued lack of adequate resourcing and infrastructure in historically disadvantaged schools, continues to contribute to a widening educational gap between the desegregated urban middle-class and the black township and rural poor – contrary to the democratic government’s educational goals of equity, access and redress.

There is a growing public recognition of the role of language in learning and, specifically, the problems caused for learning across the curriculum for learners with poor English proficiency, particularly as recent research has linked this to poor performance in mathematics and science (Clynick and Lee 2004; Howie 2001). However teacher training has lagged behind and there is little specific training for teachers in how to teach effectively in bilingual situations, although there is much that could be learned from the practice of skilled and experienced teachers.

Thus there is a need to address the conflicts and tensions in classroom codeswitching and language policy through appropriate teacher training and school language policies that take into account contextual realities; and so develop bilingual classroom policies and practices that enable township and rural learners to gain access to both the knowledge and the linguistic resources necessary to break out of the poverty trap. Classroom codeswitching is not merely a matter of linguistic interest, but is also closely tied to issues of social justice for the majority of learners in South Africa.

### Notes

1. Townships are segregated dormitory suburbs on the urban peripheries, created to house urban blacks under apartheid.
2. Since 1994, all state schools have been opened to all learners; however it is only the formerly 'white', 'coloured' and 'Indian' schools that have effectively become desegregated, as the movement has been from less resourced to better resourced schools and so the demographics of formerly 'African' schools have remained relatively unchanged. Apartheid policies restricted the processes of urbanisation and so languages have clear regional bases and in schools most frequently a regional language dominates, apart from in the multilingual townships of Johannesburg where the mining industry attracted workers from around the country.
3. By the mid 1970s there were 10 self-governing 'homelands', for different ethnic groups – four of which were 'independent but only recognised by South Africa and themselves. These were reintegrated into South Africa in 1994'.
4. The 'Freedom Charter' was a statement of intent adopted by the African National Congress (now the ruling party in South Africa) and its allies in 1955, at a time when the Afrikaner-dominated Nationalist government was introducing its apartheid policies.
5. For example, in the former homelands of the Eastern Cape province, illiteracy rates (adults with seven years of schooling or less) are 60–80%, unemployment is 60–82% and households living in poverty 80–93% (Bot, Dove, and Wilson 2000).

### References

- Adendorff, R.D. 1996. The functions of code switching among high school teachers and students in Kwazulu and implications for teacher education. In *Voices from the language classroom: Qualitative research in second language education*, eds. K.M. Bailey and D. Nunan, 338–406. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- ANC. 1955. The freedom charter. <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/charter.html> (accessed February 19 2008).
- Arthur, J. 1994. English in Botswana primary classrooms: Functions and constraint. In *Teaching and researching language in African classrooms*, ed. C.M. Rubagumya, 63–78. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Ball, S.J. 1994. *Education reform: A critical and post-structural approach*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Barnes, D. 1992. The role of talk in learning. In *Thinking voices: The work of the National Oracy Project*, ed. K. Norman. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Bot, M., S. Dove, and D. Wilson. 2000. *The education atlas of South Africa 2000*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Education Foundation.
- Bot, M., and J. Shindler. 1997. *Baseline study: Macro indicators 1991–1996*. Braamfontein: Centre for Policy Development, Evaluation and Management.
- Clynick, T., and R. Lee. 2004. From laggard to world class: Reforming maths and science education in South African schools. Research report 13. Johannesburg, South Africa: The Centre for Development and Enterprise.
- Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. 1996. Act 108 of 1996. <http://www.polity.org.org.za/govdocs/constitution/saconst.html> (accessed February 19 2008).

- Department of Education. 1997. *Language in education policy*. Government Gazette, 17997 (383). Pretoria, South Africa: Government Printer.
- Emerging Voices. 2005. A report on Education in South African Rural Communities. Johannesburg, South Africa: Nelson Mandela Foundation.
- Hartshorne, K. 1992. *Crisis and challenge: Black Education 1910–1990*. Cape Town, South Africa: Oxford University Press.
- Heugh, K. 1995. From unequal education to the real thing. In *Multilingual Education for South Africa*, eds. K. Heugh, A. Siegruhn, and P. Pluddermann, 42–52. Johannesburg, South Africa: Heinemann.
- Howie, S.J. 2001. *Mathematics and science performance in grade 8 in South Africa 1998/1999*. Pretoria, South Africa: Human Sciences Research Council.
- Lin, A.M.Y. 1996. Bilingualism or linguistic segregation? Symbolic domination, resistance and code switching in Hong Kong schools. *Linguistics and Education* 8, no. 1: 49–84.
- Luckett, K. 1995. National additive multilingualism: Towards a language plan for South African education. In *Multilingual Education for South Africa*, eds. K. Heugh, A. Siegruhn, and P. Pluddermann, 73–8. Johannesburg, South Africa: Heinemann.
- Macdonald, C.A. 1990. 'How many years do you have?' English language skills evaluation (A final report of the Threshold Project). Pretoria, South Africa: Human Sciences Research Council.
- Martin, P.W. 1996. Code-switching in the primary classroom: One response to the planned and unplanned language environment in Brunei. *Journal of Multilingual and multicultural Development* 17, no. 2–4: 128–44.
- Martin-Jones, M. 1995. Code-switching in the classroom: two decades of research. In *One speaker, two languages: cross-disciplinary perspectives on code-switching*, eds. L. Milroy and P. Muysken, 90–111. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Merrit, M. 1992. Socialising multilingualism: determinants of code-switching in Kenyan primary classrooms. *Journal of Multilingual and multicultural Development* 13, no. 1, 2: 103–121.
- Mesthrie, R. 2002. South Africa: A sociolinguistic overview. In *Language in South Africa*, ed. R. Mesthrie. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI). 1992. *Language*. Cape Town, South Africa: Oxford University Press/National Education Coordinating Committee.
- Ndayipfukamiye, L. 1994. Codeswitching in Burundi, primary classrooms. In *Teaching and researching language in African classrooms*, ed. C.M. Rubagumya, 79–95. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Pennycook, A. 1994. The cultural politics of English as an international language. London: Longman.
- Probyn, M.J. 1995. Exploring a myth. Unpublished paper, submitted in part-requirement for BEd degree, University of Cape Town.
- Probyn, M.J. 2001. Teachers' voices: Teachers' reflections on learning and teaching through the medium of English as a second language. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 4, no. 4: 249–66.
- Probyn, M.J. 2006a. Language and learning science in South Africa. *Language and Education* 20, no. 5: 391–414.
- Probyn, M.J. 2006b. Teachers' resistance and resilience in some South African rural classrooms. Paper presented at the TESOL 2006 Conference, March 2006, Tampa, Florida.
- Probyn, M., S. Murray, L. Botha, P. Botya, M. Brooks, and V. Westphal. 2002. Minding the gaps – an investigation into language policy and practice in four Eastern Cape districts. *Perspectives in Education* 20, no. 1: 29–46.
- Setati, M., J. Adler, Y. Reed, and A. Bapoo. 2002. Code-switching and other language practices in mathematics, science and English language classrooms in South Africa. In *Challenges of teacher development: An investigation of take-up in South Africa*, eds. J. Adler and Y. Reed, 73–93. Pretoria, South Africa: Schaik.
- Soudien, C. 2004. 'Constituting the class': An analysis of the process of 'integration' in South African schools. In *Changing class: Educational and social change in post-apartheid South Africa*, ed. L. Chisholm. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

- Statistics South Africa. 2000. *Stats in brief*. Pretoria, South Africa: Statistics South Africa.
- Wong-Fillmore, L. 1986. Teaching bilingual learners. In *Handbook of research on teaching*, ed. M.C. Wittrock, 648–685. New York: Macmillan.
- Wright, L. 2002. Mother tongue, other tongue: Law, learning and literature. Keynote address presented at the 14th Conference of the English Academy of Southern Africa, 4–6 April 2002, Pretoria.