

Policy options to crack the mother tongue versus English riddle in South African schools

By [Nompumelelo Mhohlwane](#)

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Internationally, education theory favours [mother-tongue](#) instruction and recommends that schooling should begin in the language the child knows best, often their mother tongue. Even with limited studies in Africa, evidence in Botswana, Tanzania, Ethiopia, [Kenya](#) and [South Africa](#) supports this.



Image source: Getty Images

In South Africa mother-tongue instruction is maintained until the third year in most schools. The language of teaching and learning changes to English from Grade 4 and then mother tongue is taught as a subject rather than used as the language of instruction.

However, the [Language in Education Policy](#) allows schools to extend the years of mother-tongue instruction until Grade 6. This shows an inconsistency between the language policy and the schooling experience.

Implementation and education researchers have been [calling](#) for the extension of mother-tongue instruction beyond the current status quo in line with the policy. But parents seem to be requesting an even earlier transition to English.

When asked which language should be the main language of instruction in the first three years of school, respondents have increasingly favoured English in the [South African Social Attitudes Survey](#).

In [2003](#) the response was 55% in favour of English, but this increased to 65% in [2018](#). This is incompatible with the demographics of South Africa. In the last [census](#) less than 10% of the population identified English as their home language.

This article discusses three policy options drawn from my [research](#) on language in education in South Africa. I'll outline what's necessary to implement these options and what can be done to make progress in policy and society.

Policy options

The first policy option is maintaining the status quo and teaching in the various African mother tongues while also introducing English, and then transitioning to English from Grade 4.

This is the most supported policy option in terms of teacher and learner resources. The curriculum statements – which set out what should be taught and when – are available in mother tongue only until Grade 3. These are an important teacher resource used across the country. In addition, the educational culture of this option has been established.

But there are gaps which show that this option still needs further investment.

Firstly, few university courses adequately equip teachers with the skills of successfully teaching home languages. Secondly, the education system needs to develop reading materials for successful home-language teaching. Efforts towards this are already underway but more resources and additional investments from universities, publishers, linguists and education specialists are needed.

The second policy option would be to delay moving to English as a medium of instruction until Grade 6, in line with the language policy. This option builds on the first. Similarly, it would also need material development for reading. But in addition, it would require the development and reviewing of previous science, geography and maths textbooks into South Africa's 11 official languages in line with the current curriculum for Grade 4 through to Grade 6. This assumes that academic and scientific terminology exists across all 11 languages to aid textbook revisions or development.

A third policy option would be to take African languages further than Grade 6 and strengthen the path to enable tertiary education in African languages. That would mean strengthened African language teaching and learning to create an environment where African languages are not only used as a bridge to English. They would become languages of society, education and formal work while the role of English to learn science, geography and other subjects in later grades would still be recognised.

Creating an educational environment geared to offer all levels of schooling in African languages over time would require the most extensive effort. But the [initiative](#) by some schools in Eastern Cape to start offering Grade 12 in isiXhosa and Sesotho show that this is feasible.

Next steps

African languages warrant the pursuit of all of the three policy options in a careful and well planned manner with clear, well articulated, staggered implementation. This would recognise and strengthen education as it currently is, while creating a path to a different policy direction.

Whichever option is pursued, there's a need for language policy implementation in education with greater cognisance of the relationship between education and the economy. It's not just a technocratic issue about writing the right policy.

Language is a societal issue. It requires a recognition of multilingualism as a lucrative resource for South Africa, not just in

identity and culture but also economically.

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