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The Role and Place of Sign Language in the Lesotho Education Context: Some Sociolinguistic Implications

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in full fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2009

Abstract

This study explores the role and place of Lesotho Sign Language (LSL) in the education of deaf learners. It seeks to determine how the present language-in-education policy and language practices at home and in the schools for the deaf impact on education of deaf learners. For this purpose, the research focuses on the schools for the deaf as the sites where policy is to be implemented. The study also investigates the attitude of policy makers towards the inclusion of LSL in the current national language-in-education policy.

A qualitative approach to research was adopted for this study. Data was collected mainly through interviews with policy makers, deaf children, teachers and parents of deaf learners. To complement this data, observations were conducted in schools where deaf children in Lesotho are taught. The study is a language policy study and as such, language planning and bilingual education theories are interrogated. Rationale choice theory is applied to explain which factors policy makers in Lesotho consider in language planning. This is an attempt to understand reasons that may enable or hinder the inclusion of LSL in the national language-in-education policy. Additionally, based on Cummins' theoretical framework for minority student intervention and empowerment, the study suggests the adoption of bilingual model for the schools of the deaf to teaching deaf learners. Bilingual education does not only encourage instruction through LSL, it also provides an opportunity for deaf learners to decide on the language that best meets their learning needs.

The analysis of data revealed that education of deaf learners in Lesotho is not satisfactory. This is due to three main reasons. First, Lesotho Sign Language is not sufficiently used in the schools for the deaf. The situation brings about discrepancy between the mother tongue policy and its implementation. Secondly, teachers are neither adequately proficient in LSL nor are they conversant with Deaf culture. Coupled with all these, teachers lack skills suitable to teach deaf children. Thirdly, parents are not actively involved in the education of their children. All these impact negatively on the education of deaf learners in Lesotho. Finally, although policy makers showed a positive attitude towards the inclusion of LSL in the current national language-in-education, they expressed a lot of skepticism on whether the government would be wiling to financially ready for the implementation of such policy.

Based on these findings, this research is an important contribution to describing the situation of Deaf education in Lesotho and the inherent difficulties that Deaf learners experience due to the current language practices in the schools for the Deaf. The study is also of great value since in Lesotho, most people are not aware of deafness as a phenomenon or of the existence of Sign Language. Literature on Lesotho language policy and minority languages focuses on spoken languages. The ostensible avoidance of LSL in both academic and policy circles is therefore the main focus of this study.

Dedication

To the memory of Dr Puleng Hanong

For raising my interest in issues of language policy.

Declaration

I, Lits'episo 'Mabokang Matlosa, declare that this is my original work. It has never been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University. I am submitting it for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Departments of Linguistics and Centre for Deaf Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

_____

(Name of Candidate)

____day of _____2009

Acknowledgements

With the deepest gratitude, I wish to thank every person who has participated in the study for taking time to talk with me or offer any other kind of assistance. My sincere appreciation goes to the Deaf children, parents, teachers in schools for the Deaf and policy makers, that is, officers in the Ministry of Education and Training, including lecturers in the institutions of higher education in Lesotho. They welcomed me into their classrooms, teaching and personal lives and generously gave their time for the interviews and discussions. Special thanks go to the two Deaf research assistants; Likopo Lesoetsa and Regina Lephoi, and to the photographer, Lehlohonolo Makhebesela. They offered their assistance willingly and enthusiastically. Without their support the completion of study would have not been possible.

I would also like to acknowledge and express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors, Dr. Claudine Storbeck and Dr. Andrew Van De Spuy for their magnificent support and contributions to my journey and to the creation of this research and their critical comments throughout the writing of this project. I thank them, not only for their patience and invaluable professional advice, but also for taking over after the passing away of my former supervisor, Dr. Puleng Hanong. They made the feeling of loss I was experiencing bearable.

It is true that PhD is a lonely journey. I was fortunate to have friends who journeyed with me in the creation of this piece of work. In particular, I am indebted to my Kenyan friends, Jacintah Ndambuki and Phyllis Bartoo who were in the same school (SLLS) with me. Special thanks go to my friends from Lesotho, Mahali Phamotse, Nkiseng Ntho and Moleboheng Mohapi, to mention but a few.

Special thanks go to my mother, sisters and brothers. Words cannot express my thanks for your love and support. To my brother-in-law, Thinyane Matlosa, who dedicated his time to help me with transcribing; it was really appreciated.

Many thanks go to my precious family for their love and support: my husband, Dr. Khabele Matlosa who has always been on my side and whose love and support knows no limits. No appropriate words can thank you. And to my precious children, Bokang and Tony. To Bokang, whose computer skills were very valuable, and to Tony, who used to encourage me and tell me everything would be ‘OK’. My family makes my existence worthwhile.

I also appreciate the financial support received from the Postgraduate Merit Award, CODESRIA’s Small Grants Programme for Thesis Writing and Carnegie Transformation Grant which made the data collection and completion of my thesis possible.

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