

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

LITŠEPISO MATLOSA

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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 willing 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

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