Until African languages take their

The colonial languages shackle the development and self-esteem of all indigenous people

Neo Lekgotla iaga Ramoupi

The 20-year review of the African-language policy in education from 1994–2014 has to be seen in the context of the present university student protests.

We have to go back to Bantu Steve Biko, who explained how the absence of one’s language, not using your own language, can help in the development of an inferiority complex.

Giving evidence in the South African Students’ Organisation/Black People’s Convention trial in May 1976, Biko said: “We have a society here in South Africa which recognises in the main two languages, English and Afrikaans as official languages. These are languages that you have to use at school, at university, or in pursuit of any discipline when you are studying as a black man.

“Unfortunately, the books you read are in English, English is a second language to you; you have probably been taught in a vernacular especially during these days of Bantu education; you grapple with the language to ... matrie and, before you conquer it, you must apply it now to learn discipline at university.

“As a result, you never quite catch everything that is in a book; you certainly understand the paragraph ... but you are not quite adept at reproducing an argument that was in a particular book, precisely because of your failure to understand certain words in the book.

“This makes you less articulate as a black man generally, and this makes you more inward-looking; you feel things rather than say them, and this applies to Afrikaans as well ... and therefore people find it difficult to move beyond a certain point in their comprehension of the language.”

These words are strikingly relevant today, when we are seeing language policy protests happening at the University of Pretoria (UP) and at the University of Stellenbosch.

The preamble of the Constitution speaks of “past injustices, including the dehumanising, suppressing, diminishing and marginalising of African languages”, and the struggle was also about freeing the languages of the African. Liberation in 1994 meant that the dominance of European languages over African languages should end.

That is why, over the 22-year period of democracy in South Africa, the then department of education and later the departments of basic education and higher education and training formulated, discussed and deliberated drafts, Bills and white papers on language policy in education.

The Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997) expressed its intentions about the country’s language policy: “The Constitution gives full recognition to the fact that South Africa is a multilingual country, and multilingualism is a prime objective of national language policy in general and further education, as determined by the minister in terms of the South African Schools Act, 1996.

“South Africa’s rich language inheritance offers many opportunities and challenges to the higher education sector, but thus far there has been no national policy framework within which the higher education institutions could establish their own institutional language policies and programmes, and which would enable the ministry of education to lend support to the achievement of national language goals.”

The first move towards this language policy came under the first minister of education in the post-apartheid dispensation, Professor Sibusiso Bhengu, appointed by Nelson Mandela in 1994.

It is paramount to put into context that the Mandela presidency was about reconciliation and nation building, so that we can understand the tone of Bhengu’s occupation of this post until 1999.

This language policy is the foundation of the successive policies made in education to date. It was called The Language in Education Policy 1997 and was the first pronouncement on language in education by the new national department of education. It was the shortest policy document, with only four pages.

The policy was a point of departure on the language debate at national level in the post-apartheid era. Its preamble states: “This language in education policy document should be seen as part of a continuous process by which policy for language in education is being developed as part of a national language plan encompassing all sectors of society, including the deaf community.”

The policy acknowledges the country’s cultural diversity as a valuable national asset, and that is why the policy aimed to promote multilingualism, the development of the official languages, and a respect for all languages, including South African sign language.

The document confronted the question of African languages in education that, I argue, continues to be the challenge of South Africa 20 years into our liberation.

That problem is that language in education policy has been fraught with tensions, contradictions and sensitivities, and has been undermined by racial and linguistic discrimination. Several discriminatory policies have affected either the access of pupils to the education system or their success within it.

Let me address the promotion of multilingualism and its association with multiculturalism, because the policy document mentions it first.

I favour definitions of multiculturalism that say “the view that the various cultures in a society merit equal respect and scholarly interest”, and “the preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a unified society, as a state or nation”.

The assumption then is that it should be the first priority in the list of tasks that must be achieved by the policy.

The majority of South Africans who are Africans are already multilingual and multicultural, because in addition to their various African mother-tongue languages, they were forced by the successive colonial and apartheid governments to learn English, Dutch and later Afrikaans and each of these languages were learnt with their cultures.

You cannot say the same about those whose mother-tongue languages are English and Afrikaans, even when the speakers are Africans, white and black.

They are not multilingual and they are not multicultural, or at least the majority of them are not. Most are bilingual and bicultural, and in some cases monolingual and monocultural, because some Afrikaans speakers say they don’t speak English and some English speakers say they don’t speak Afrikaans, a product of the unhealed wounds of the South African War of 1899-1902.

By biculturalism and monoculturalism I mean the presence of two different cultures in the same country and the valuing of one’s ethnic and cultural group over others, and the belief in one “right” culture, respectively.

The consequence of prioritising multilingualism or multiculturalism is that it allowed those whose languages were formally the official languages in the national education and curricula of the country to hide under the pretext of multilingualism and multiculturalism. In essence, as