



**FW de Klerk**  
FOUNDATION

## **LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: SOUTH AFRICA AND SPAIN**

*By Ana Rio, intern: FW de Klerk Foundation*

Language of instruction is a key issue at the heart of debate in most multilingual countries. Mother language-based bilingual or multilingual approaches in education are widely recognised as an important factor for inclusion and quality in education. According to the *UNESCO Guidelines on Language and Education* published in 2003, “*Mother tongue instruction is essential for initial instruction and literacy and should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible*”. Educating children in the same language as they speak at home greatly facilitates the learning process and provides a sound base for the more effective acquisition of global languages - like English - in high school. It also improves prospects for social and professional integration.

This being said, countries differ substantially in their language policies from, for example, the Russian government’s refusal to legislate in favour of recognising other languages spoken in Russia other than Russian, to Guatemala, which officially recognises 24 languages and has implemented intercultural bilingual education reforms.

Both South Africa and Spain are multilingual countries, recognised as such by their respective Constitutions. A comparative perspective on how South Africa and Spain manage their challenges concerning minority languages and education illustrates that measures to promote language diversity can significantly vary from one country to another.

The main challenges for South Africa concerning education and minority languages lie in the partial compliance with legislation in force and the need for appropriate measures to guarantee language diversity in education. English is increasingly becoming the main language of instruction, to the detriment of African languages and Afrikaans.

In Spain, instruction in minority languages is only provided in those regions where such languages have an official status. This means, for example, that a Basque-speaking child cannot receive instruction in Basque in a region other than the Basque Country and Navarre, where Basque and Spanish are both official languages. The debate on education and languages is ongoing in Spain, with some political tensions between central and regional governments.

### **National and international frameworks**

The Constitutions of South Africa and Spain, respectively in section 6 and article 3, recognise language diversity. The Constitution of South Africa establishes 11 official languages (*Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu*). The Constitution of Spain establishes a unique official language (Spanish) and co-official languages without explicitly naming them, “*The other Spanish languages shall also be official in the respective self governing Regions in accordance with their Statutes*”. The co-official languages are Basque, Catalan, Galician and Aranese.



**FW de Klerk**  
FOUNDATION

While the 11 official languages of South Africa enjoy equal status throughout the country, Spain has a policy of “territorial bilingualism”. Spanish is the only official language throughout the whole country. Other languages are official in the regions where they are recognised and regional governments are responsible for promoting them with little or no central government intervention. Each region (Autonomous Community) has legislative powers which enables the promulgation of linguistic laws.

The Constitution of South Africa, approved in 1996, goes beyond the Constitution of Spain by establishing the extent of the rights related to languages and education by indicating that “*Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and the implementation of this right, the state must consider all reasonable alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account (a) equity; (b) practicability and (c) the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices*” (section 29). Moreover, awareness of the importance of language diversity within public administration and public enterprise has led to the adoption of the *Use of Official Languages Act* in 2012 - as required by the Constitution - with the aim to regulate and monitor the use of official languages.

In the case of Spain, reference must be made to the *Statute of Autonomies* (laws hierarchically located under the Constitution of Spain and over any other form of legislation) to find specific references concerning languages to be used in the field of education, such as in the case of the region of Galicia. The *Linguistic Normalisation Law (Ley de Normalización lingüística 3/1983* from 15 June) indicates that “*Galician, as the language of Galicia, is also official in teaching at all educational levels*”. This law was created to ensure citizens’ rights to use Galician, especially in areas of public administration, education and the media.

Furthermore, it is also important to take into account that South Africa and Spain are parties to several international treaties, which encourage countries to respect the rights of minorities to be taught in their mother language. Both countries are parties to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. This treaty, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966, commits contracting parties to respect the civil and political rights of individuals. Article 27 establishes that “*In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language*”. The principle of equality and non-discrimination is also included in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* of 19 December 1966; the *Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination* of 20 November 1963; the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* of 20 November 1959 and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 10 December 1948.

Spain also ratified the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 1992 to protect and promote historical, regional and minority languages in Europe.



Both in the case of South Africa and Spain, regional (in the case of Spain), national and international laws provide a legal framework for the respect and promotion of linguistic diversity. In practice, however, the situation is more complicated. As indicated by Fernand de Varennes in the document *Expert Report on Human Rights & Medium of Instruction in South African Tertiary Education*<sup>1</sup>, “there is no single human rights treaty that recognises unambiguously in a specific provision a right to be educated in the mother tongue in public education” but “there are however many other documents, experts and officials who claim that education in a minority language or mother tongue is a highly desirable and appropriate approach for pedagogical and other purposes”.

### **Challenges facing mother language education in Spain and South Africa**

#### Spain: Managing diversity through different language policies

For 37 years Spain suffered a dictatorship and a coercive language policy which prevented millions of Spaniards from studying in their mother language, if it was not Spanish. The establishment of the 1979 Constitution marked a decisive step towards restoring linguistic imbalances suffered during this period. Since the promulgation of the Constitution of Spain, Spanish regions have been granted political and administrative competences.

Spain is today composed of 17 Autonomous Communities and two Autonomous Cities with different degrees of autonomy. The competencies in matters of language policy in schools are left up to the regional governments. Today, each region with a co-official language has its own language policy concerning education. This is, for example, the case for Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country<sup>2</sup>. The Linguistic Normalisation Laws from 1983 gave Catalan, Basque and Galician languages an official status in their respective Autonomous Communities and also provided regional authorities with control over the educational system and the power to develop their own language education policy.

The following language policies implemented in the Autonomous Communities of Galicia, Catalonia and the Basque Country give an overview of the diversity of measures taken in Spain to promote education in minority languages:

- Galicia: A bilingual education model provides a balance of 50% of the subjects between Galician and Spanish, with the exception of some trilingual schools - in Galician, Spanish and English - in which the percentages are 33% for each language.
- Catalonia: The Immersion Language Policy sets Catalan as the sole language in school. This means that all subjects are taught in Catalan, except Spanish language and literature and foreign language classes.

---

<sup>1</sup> De Varennes F, *Expert Report on Human Rights & Medium of Instruction in South African Tertiary Education*. February 2015.

<sup>2</sup> By way of practical illustration, references are made for three Autonomous Communities in Spain: Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia.



- Basque Country: The language policy allows parents to choose between three different systems:
  - A - Education is entirely in Spanish, with Basque as a compulsory subject.
  - B - Education is partly in Basque, partly in Spanish (usually mathematics and reading/writing).
  - D - Education is entirely in Basque, with Spanish as a compulsory subject.
- Another system is prescribed for students living temporarily in the Basque Country:
  - X - Education is entirely in Spanish.

The majority of parents choose option D, where children are taught in Basque.

Education in co-official languages is generally ensured in the regions where these languages are officially recognised. This applies in primary, secondary and higher education.

However, Spain still faces several challenges and language policies are often at the heart of debate. The last big debate took place during 2013 - 2014 with notable repercussions in Catalonia. In May 2013, Jose Ignacio Wert, the current Minister of Education, Culture and Sports, presented a bill with several reforms concerning education. One of the objectives was to guarantee education in Spanish in all Autonomous Communities, after some families filed judicial complaints requesting their children to be taught in Spanish in Catalonia's public schools. After much controversy and debate, the new legislation, called the *Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality (Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa)*, took effect in most Autonomous Communities in September 2014. Under the new legislation, central government undertakes to pay enrolment fees in private schools where there is no offer of Spanish in public schools and then deducts the amount from funds allocated from central government to the Autonomous Communities. However, it is essential to point out that this law does not protect the other official languages in the same way as Spanish, which creates inequality between languages.

It must also be pointed out that people speaking a co-official language in a region where it is not recognised as such have no specific rights to receive education in their mother language. This right only applies to the Autonomous Communities where co-official languages are recognised. The co-official languages are rarely taught in the regions where they are not official, even in non-formal education.

#### South Africa: English as the main language of instruction

The Constitution of South Africa was approved in 1996 and gave prominence to language rights. It guarantees South Africans' individual freedom to use their own languages; freedom from linguistic discrimination and the assurance that their languages will be treated equitably and will enjoy parity of esteem. Section 6(4) obliges the national government and provincial governments to regulate and monitor their use of official languages by legislative and other measures.



South Africa is composed of nine provinces. The powers of the provincial governments are limited to specific areas listed in the Constitution, including education. However, the province's powers are shared with the national government, which can establish uniform standards. Provincial governments should follow the indications set by the national government.

Two national departments are responsible for education in South Africa. The Department of Basic Education, which is responsible for primary and secondary schools; and the Department of Higher Education and Training, which is responsible for tertiary education and vocational training. The nine South African provinces also have their own education departments that are responsible for implementing the national department policies and dealing with local issues.

At local level, the entities which have decision-making powers over language of instruction in South Africa are the local School Governing Bodies. The *South African Schools Act* of 1996 mandates the establishment of School Governing Bodies including parents, educators and non-educator members of staff. According to the *South African Schools Act*, it is up to the governing body to determine the language policy of the school.

The geographical distribution of predominant first spoken languages per province<sup>3</sup> allows for a better understanding of language diversity in South Africa:

- Eastern Cape - isiXhosa (78.8%), Afrikaans (10.6%), English (5.6%).
- Free State - Sesotho (64.2%), Afrikaans (12.7%), isiXhosa (7.5%).
- Gauteng - isiZulu (19.8%), English (13.3%), Afrikaans (12.4%), Sesotho (11.6%).
- KwaZulu-Natal - isiZulu (77.8%), English (13.2%), isiXhosa (3.4%).
- Limpopo - Sepedi (52.9%), Xitsonga (17%), Tshivenda (16.7%).
- Mpumalanga - siSwati (27.7%), isiZulu (24.1%), Xitsonga (10.4%), isiNdebele(10.1%).
- Northern Cape - Afrikaans (53.8%), Setswana (33.1%), isiXhosa (5.3%).
- North West - Setswana (63.4%), Afrikaans (9%), Sesotho (5.8%).
- Western Cape - Afrikaans (49.7%), isiXhosa (24.7%), English (20.2%).

These statistics clearly show that African languages and Afrikaans are more widely spoken as a first language than English in the nine provinces. However, despite the language rights established in the Constitution and the adoption of the *Use of Official Languages Act* in 2012, English is still the main language used by public authorities throughout the country, to the detriment of other official languages. This situation also affects education where children are mostly taught in English, even if this language is not spoken at home.

There are various reasons for this situation. First of all, there is a lack of implementation of instruments specifically created to promote linguistic diversity. For example, a considerable number of civil society and political players point out that action taken by the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) - established by the Constitution with the aim, amongst

---

<sup>3</sup> Census 2011 figures. Source: Statistics South Africa.



others, to promote and create conditions for the development and use of all official languages - is insufficient and have reported dysfunctional procedures, such as inefficient budget management, internal problems and a lack of effective measures.

Furthermore, the *Use of Official Languages Act* has still not been implemented. Under the Act, national departments, public enterprises and entities should make use of at least three official languages for public communication purposes within 18 months of commencement of the Act. The initial date for adoption of national language policies was 2 November 2014. However, as many public entities still have not complied with their obligations a new date has been set.

Another reason that can justify the current situation is the role played by the School Governing Bodies. Parents form the majority on School Governing Bodies and, as they are in a powerful position, they can influence language policy. In too many schools they choose English as the language of tuition - because they incorrectly believe that it will enhance the educational prospects of their children. This often leads to situations where primary school children are taught in English - a language that they do not understand - by teachers whose first language is not English. Quality education cannot be achieved when education is given in a language that learners do not understand, but this is the situation faced by many children from language minority groups when they start formal school.

In view of this situation, and taking into account that it does not seem possible today to leave the responsibility of the choice of language instruction solely to the School Governing Bodies, it would appear necessary for the government to take measures and establish directives able to redress the situation of language instruction according to language distribution among the provinces. Public administration should consider, as much as possible, to ensure public primary education in at least two of the most spoken languages in each province (or in the three/ four most spoken languages in the case of the provinces of Gauteng and Mpumalanga), with a gradual introduction of English as a second language.

#### **Language diversity, democracy and social cohesion**

It appears that, despite some unresolved challenges, post-Franco Spain has been able to find a balance between the official and co-official languages thanks to a decentralised political system which permitted the development of different language policies throughout the country.

For its part, South Africa has in its Constitution a solid base for the equal treatment and the promotion of the 11 official languages. Depending on appropriate implementation, the *Use of Official Languages Act* can also be a significant step towards greater equality between languages.

Nevertheless, it is also true that a considerable gap still remains between constitutional provisions and practices in South African schools. Effective education policies, which should include specific training for the teaching of minority languages and the supply of learning materials, together with improved implementation of the policies of the Pan South African



**FW de Klerk**  
FOUNDATION

Language Board, can play a central role in ensuring high-quality education in minority languages.

It is undeniable that measures promoting language diversity in South Africa and Spain - and thereby their rich cultural diversity - are essential pillars for democracy and social cohesion. In that sense, it is positive to note that language-related issues are part of their respective political agendas.