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Language Policy and Mother-Tongue Education Debate

Whose Language Leads? Identity, Access and the Classroom

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Opening Reflection

Language is more than a medium, it is memory, meaning and belonging. In South Africa, where linguistic diversity is both a gift and a challenge, the language of instruction has long shaped who thrives and who struggles. The recent rollout of Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTbBE) marks a turning point. It invites us to ask: Whose language leads in the classroom? And how do we honour the voices that have been silenced by systems built for someone else's tongue?

What Happened

In early 2025, the Department of Basic Education began implementing the MTbBE programme, extending mother-tongue instruction beyond Grade 3 into Grade 4 and beyond. This Late-Exit Model will gradually introduce bilingual teaching in Mathematics and Natural Science, allowing learners to engage content in their home languages while acquiring English. President Ramaphosa affirmed this shift in his State of the Nation Address, calling it a step toward equity and multilingualism.

Language scholars, including Dr Xolisa Guzula and Prof. Lolie Makhubu-Badenhorst, welcomed the move, citing research that shows African language speakers fall significantly behind when forced to switch to English too early. The Department also committed to developing bilingual assessments and expanding AI-supported translation tools to support the rollout.

What It Reveals

This moment reveals the deep inequities embedded in our language policies. While English and Afrikaans learners benefit from continuity, most African language speakers face a disruptive shift in Grade 4, often without adequate support. It also exposes the myth of neutrality in language choice. Every language carries power, and every policy decision shapes access.

From a systems-thinking lens, language is a lever of inclusion or exclusion. MTbBE is not just a pedagogical shift, it is a structural correction.

Why It Matters

Language determines comprehension, confidence and cognitive development. When learners are taught in a language they understand, they learn better, think deeper and participate more fully. MTbBE offers a chance to close achievement gaps, affirm cultural identity and build a more just education system.

Philosophically, this aligns with decolonial theory, translanguaging pedagogy and Ubuntu ethics. It recognises that every child deserves to learn in a language that honours their story.

Reflective Responses

What does effective mother-tongue education look like?

It means bilingual teaching that scaffolds learning, not segregates it. It means trained teachers, quality materials and assessments that reflect linguistic diversity.

How do we ensure MTbBE succeeds in practice?

By investing in teacher development, curriculum design and community engagement. By resisting the temptation to treat language as a technical fix, rather than a relational tool.

What risks emerge if implementation is rushed or underfunded?

Confusion, resistance and widened disparities. Without support, MTbBE may falter, not because it is flawed, but because it is fragile.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Insights from DBE and UCT Scholars (2025):

- 78% of South African learners are taught and assessed in a second language
- The achievement gap between African language speakers and English/Afrikaans speakers reaches 37% by Grade 6
- MTbBE will begin with Grade 4 in 2025, expanding annually to cover full primary schooling

“Language is not just a tool for learning, it is a tool for liberation. When we teach children in their own language, we teach them that they matter.” - <i>Dr Xolisa Guzula</i>
