



English: Language of controversy

The politics of learning languages in South African society

NARRATOR

Neville Alexander, a former prisoner of the South African apartheid regime, talks about his role in English language policy and planning in South Africa and his views on the place of English and other languages in South African society.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

When I came out of prison I was put under house arrest and for a number of years, five years, I was unable to be involved in education. But from '79 onwards I was then able to start to work in educational institutions, not in schools, but for example at the university which had a certain measure of autonomy and of course in non-government organisations that were committed to educational improvement. The most important at that time was the South African Committee on Higher Education of which I became the Cape Town director from 1980 onwards and I shared my time between that organisation and this university, teaching sociology and history and German. And it is there that my real interest in language planning, in understanding the language question as a political question, as a question of liberation. It's there that it was really awakened to the full.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

It became very clear to me that even teachers, black teachers mainly, had not under apartheid education had not managed to get full command of the English language and generally of even their own languages although under apartheid as is fairly widely known there was mother tongue education right up into the secondary schools for black children. But in spite of that they had not got full command. Every year, as soon as we come closer to final exams, students go out on strike, on boycott and so on and we simply pouring money down the drain. And all this money of course came from outside the country. So what is it that gives rise to these boycotts? What, What's wrong with the system as it were? What were we as people in the liberation movement who were working in the educational domain, what were we doing wrong that students felt they should do this and they could do this and so on.

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It became clear that one of the issues which agitated students was the fact that they didn't have a sufficient command of English and the result was that since they had to write examinations, particularly in English, they were frustrated. So even though they knew things

or they thought they knew, they were unable to express it, especially in writing. But even in ordinary speech, it was difficult for them to express it and that came through very clear that was one of the issues and that's why it was decided that look, we can do something about this. At least at tertiary level, at the level of in-service training for teachers there is something we can do about this. We can help to upgrade the proficiency and English language skills of people in that sort of layer of society.

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As a result we then formed an organisation called initially the National English Language Project and the idea was essentially to upgrade the English language skills of particularly students, in-service training for teachers and so on.

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I was then put in charge of this National English Language Project and in the period of about two months of consultation across the country, some of it underground, it became fairly obvious as a result of the evidence and you know views expressed by political organisations of the oppressed, it became very obvious that actually it wasn't about English.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

English was one of the issues, possibly even the main issue at the time but it was about language as such. And after a lot of discussion we decided that the project should really be called The National Language Project, which is what happened. And I became director of the NLP as we called it – National Language Project - and the idea then was to promote first of all proficiency in English for those who either wanted it or needed it. And secondly to promote the development and use of African languages, indigenous African languages, including Afrikaans. From the start, in spite of Soweto 1976, in spite of widespread prejudice against Afrikaans, amongst black people, for obvious reasons, from the start we were very clear that Afrikaans had to be dealt with as an African language as a language that is relatively marginalised, even at that time, even under apartheid. So for the best part of seven years I directed the National Language Project. I had very competent colleagues, friends, comrades, in many cases, who worked with me, and we produced lots of material, organised many courses, gave advice to people, did a lot of research on the language issue, more particularly on the ways in which language use, language policy, language in practice, promoted inequality and as a result of that kind of input I began to focus on language planning as a specific discipline.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

Fundamentally what we were saying can be put in a very simple formula namely that every South African needs to know apart from his or her mother tongue, whatever it is, needs to know English as part and parcel of a global survival kit as it were for every individual in the

world today. And in addition to that a second important South African language. In other words a multilingual policy, language policy, such that if two South Africans meet anywhere in the world or in South Africa they would immediately be able to decide which language they would want to speak in and communicate with each other.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

The Language and Education Policy, It's, it's based on additive bilingualism. In other words the argument is that it should be based on the mother tongues of the children. It's a learner centred policy, based on the mother tongues of the children and that English should be phased in both as a subject and as a medium of teaching, gradually so that when the child has what we call second language instructional competence; when the child actually knows enough English to be taught in the medium of English meaningfully, then that option is there. It doesn't mean it has to happen. The language policy doesn't say the child must go over to English. But for most parents for obvious reasons and for ideological reasons, that is the path they've chosen. In most cases it's the wrong path.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

We believe that you should keep the mother tongue medium going as long as possible And that you gradually phase in English also as a medium if it's desired by the parents or by the school so that a dual medium system evolves out of that where the subject is taught or the subjects are taught either in English or the mother tongue or in both even. I was taught like that. I was taught in both English and Afrikaans in my school years. So that's the ideal as far as we're concerned. But at the moment for as I say for ideological reasons and for completely unfounded wrong pedagogical reasons people believe that the children will learn better if they are taught through the medium of English by teachers who in most cases don't know enough English. You know to be taught mathematics or science by teacher who isn't proficient in English is actually worse than not being taught at all.

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And there are a whole lot of problems and particularly because literacy is basically supposed to be taught through the medium of English and that's a huge mistake. So when it comes to the availability of school text books and so on, in the primary school, only in the foundation phase, first three or four years, you have books that are available in different languages. But beyond that there is nothing, unlike under apartheid, when you had books up to what we would now call Grade Ten in African languages, Geography, History, Science, Mathematics. We had all that. So we have to get back to that position so that obviously under very changed conditions today where there is no inferior curriculum or you know everybody has the same curriculum in order to really get the best out of our children.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER

Again middle class parents who send their children to English medium schools, what are called Former Model C schools are very satisfied because their children obviously are learning very well. But these kids have the privilege of having literate parents who are interested in education with books at home you know a print environment that really stimulates them and so on. The moment you get into a working class set up or in a rural set up that's gone. And to think that you can do the same with those kids as you do with middle class kids, black, white, green, or whatever, to think that you can do the same is just silly. So you've got to get the most the most advanced elements, the most inspired elements in the community, to provide that spark which in the middle class family the mother or the father or somebody else, elder brother or sister, can provide for the kid.

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You've got to get those elements in the community to do the same type of thing. And it works. It works like magic. We've got the kids in many different townships in Cape Town and elsewhere wanting to read and wanting to read in both in English and the mother tongue. In both English and Xhosa. In both English and Afrikaans. We have succeeded in doing that. And to roll that out is really the duty of government. When they are going to be able to do so when it will become translatable into votes for them that's a question we can't answer at the moment but that's what has to happen.