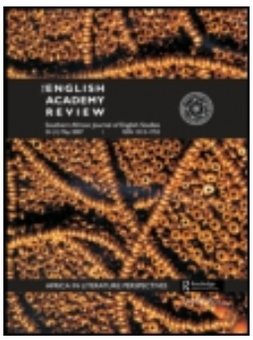

English Academy Review

ISSN: 1013-1752 (Print) 1753-5360 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/racr20

"I don't know... it contradicts": identity construction and the use of English by high school learners in a desegregated school space

George Makubalo

To cite this article: George Makubalo (2007) "I don't know… it contradicts": identity construction and the use of English by high school learners in a desegregated school space, English Academy Review, 24:2, 25-41, DOI: 10.1080/10131750701452287

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10131750701452287

Published online: 20 Jul 2007.

"I don't know . . . it contradicts": identity construction and the use of English by high school learners in a desegregated school space

George Makubalo
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg
South Africa
georgemakubalo@yahoo.com

This article explores the English language practices of four Grade 10 learners in a desegregated Johannesburg high school, as well as the ways in which the learners position themselves and others as users of English and other languages. The overall design of the research was qualitative, using ethnographic methods and drawing on the traditions of school ethnography. It draws on a post-structuralist theorising of language and identity in thinking about the relationship between language and identity, with an emphasis on the productive force of language in constituting identity. The article argues that English plays a significant role in how learners imagine themselves as members of the school community and, for some learners, constitutes an important part of their identities. It explores how multiple, and at times contradictory, identities are continually being constructed and reconstructed through learners' language practices and positioning of themselves and others as speakers of different languages. Further, it highlights processes of inclusion and exclusion that may be taking place in schools through language. An important implication of the study for schooling in South Africa is to see English as a 'commodity in great demand'.

Keywords: English; language; school desegregation; South Africa; youth identity

Introduction

'Elana, drop the phoney twang, girl' is the headline of a newspaper column (Motuba 2006) in reference to the accent of a black South African DJ of a national radio station. 'If I didn't know she was black,' the columnist writes, 'I swear I would never have been able to tell from the way she speaks'.[1] The columnist complains that '[t]here is not the slightest hint of blackness' in the way the DJ speaks English and ends the column by advising the DJ to 'get real' stating that '[i]t would not hurt a single bit if we could just once acknowledge who we are'. Issues concerning language and identity, especially in

English Academy Review 24 (2) 2007
ISSN: Print 1013-1752/Online 1753-5360

DOI: 10.1080/10131750701452287

UNISA university of south africa PRESS
Routledge Taylor & Francis Group
pp 25–41

relation to English, continue to enjoy strong prominence in both popular and academic discourse in post-apartheid South Africa. The column cited is interesting in revealing how these issues are currently being articulated.

The position of English in South Africa has been a prominent subject in academic as well as popular discourse on language usage in the country. The status of English (Kapp 2000; Rudwick 2004), its hegemony (Granville et al. 1998), its different identities, its changing ownerships (De Klerk and Gough 2002), as well as its overwhelming spread (Kamwangamalu 2003), among others, are some of the issues that have come under scrutiny. However, in spite of the appreciable amount of scholarship dedicated to the various aspects of English, there are, in my view, gaps that remain in the relevant research. The literature reveals the absence of studies on desegregated schools in South Africa, that focus on learners in dealing with language practices and positioning towards language. As a contribution towards decreasing this gap, a study focusing on the English language practices of learners in a desegregated school was conducted. It was also of interest to determine how these learners position themselves in relation to the English language and other South African official languages, in the context of an increasing local and global hegemony of English (Kamwangamalu 2003).

This article examines the ways in which learners in a desegregated school space position themselves and are positioned by others, as users of English and other languages in an environment where the use of 'proper' English, in their words, is the norm. Drawing on a post-structuralist theorising of language and identity, the argument is that English plays a significant role in how the learners imagine themselves as members of the school community and, for some learners, constitutes an important part of their identities. How multiple, and at times contradictory, identities are continually being constructed and reconstructed through learners' language practices and the positioning of themselves and others as speakers of different languages is also explored.

Literature Review

The disintegration of apartheid in the early 1990s led to a process of desegregation of previously racially homogeneous schools. Studies such as those by Vally and Dalamba (1999), Soudien and Sayed (2003), Soudien (2004) and Sujee (2004) have documented the process of school desegregation in South Africa. A number of these studies reveal that there has been a considerable movement of learners previously classified as either 'African',[2] 'coloured' or 'Indian' into formerly white 'model C' schools, especially those that are English medium.

The language issue in these desegregated, former model C schools has emerged as one of the most contested issues, especially the role, status and position of English (Chick 2001; McKay and Chick 2001). Scholars such as Granville et al. (1998) have argued that English in South Africa has achieved hegemony over other languages and is used overwhelmingly as the language of education, the media, commerce, government, business and several other domains. A number of reasons have been advanced for this

hegemonic position of English. The *Anglo-American conspiracy theory* (Kamwangamalu 2003) holds that the spread of English has been the result of deliberate interventions by particular western nations for ideological, economic and political purposes (Phillipson 1992). Other scholars argue that the hegemonic position of English is due to the process of increasing returns, where an increase in the domains in which it is used leads to more people needing to learn it, and consequently greater profitability in the production of resources in English (Granville et al. 1998).

In an environment where the majority of the speakers of English are non-first language speakers, the 'kind' of English used has been a subject of scholarly contestation (see Makoni 1999). While scholars such as Randolph Quirk have argued that 'standard English' should be the target of language learning worldwide, Braj Kachru, a strong advocate for the nativisation of English, feels Quirk's 'deficit linguistics' approach ignores the pragmatic and sociolinguistic contexts in which English is used worldwide (Phillipson 1992). Further, Njabulo Ndebele argues that 'South African English must be open to the possibilities of becoming a new language' (Ndebele 1986). However, Makoni (1999) argues that in a country such as South Africa, 'discourse about new varieties of English' such as Black South African English (BSAfE) is 'diversionary and unrelentingly subversive'. His view is that 'labels' of the 'new varieties' of English

> are diversionary and subversive because, instead of drawing attention to problems second-language speakers have with learning English as target language, they present them largely as sociolinguistically acceptable features of *English*. (Makoni 1999, 137; my emphasis)

Nonetheless, sociolinguistic studies such as De Klerk and Gough (2002) demonstrate that English, in its different domains of use, varies according to speakers and has 'acquired various identities and multiple ownerships', such as Black South African English (BSAfE). What remains to be seen, however, is whether the 'new varieties' of English will be accorded the same status as 'standard English' without their speakers being viewed as having a deficit competence.

Research shows that many schools have not radically changed their language policies, in spite of the change in the language profiles of learners (Vinjevold 1999; McKay and Chick 2001). Studies reveal that English is widely used as the medium of learning and teaching, even with the current language-in-education policy recommending the promotion and equal use of other languages in school (Chick 2001; McKay and Chick 2001; McKinney 2005). Scholars such as Nadine Dolby contend that many learners who have moved from township schools into English medium schools have been 'unprepared for instruction exclusively in English' (1999, 294). As the dominant model of integration in desegregated schools has been overwhelmingly assimilationist (Soudien 2004), learners coming into desegregated schools have been expected to learn and become proficient users of English, irrespective of their language history.

The privileged position of English inevitably makes it a site in which a wide range of identities are constructed and contested. Language, as Weedon (1997, 21) argues, is 'the

place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed'. Alistair Pennycook, following Judith Butler's discussion of the notion of performativity, emphasizes that in the relationship between language and identity, language is a 'productive force' in constituting identity, rather than 'identity being a pre-given construct that is reflected in language use' (2004, 13). Bonny Norton also highlighted 'the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's identity' in developing 'a conception of identity that is understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction' (Norton 2000, 5).

In theorising identity, the poststructuralist work of Chris Weedon (1997) and Stuart Hall (1992a), who see identity as diverse, continuously shifting and often contradictory is drawn upon. The importance of post-structuralist theory in this study lies in its recognition of the constitutive force of discourse and discursive practices, as well as the recognition that individuals are capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices (Davis and Harrè 1990; Pennycook 2004), within social and economic possibilities available to them (Norton 2000).

Methodology

The research design for the project is qualitative, using ethnographic methods and drawing on the tradition of school ethnography (Gaganakis 1992; Wright 1992; Dolby 1999, 2001). Data collection took place over a four-week period, spread over two school terms in 2005. Qualitative methods of data collection were used, including non-participant classroom observation, semi-structured individual interviews with learners, audio tracking of learners' naturally occurring speech and video recordings of lessons. The teachers whose classes were observed and the Principal of the school were also interviewed by other researchers for the broader project.[3] Six learners were selected and shadowed throughout the school day, with the researcher attending the various classes that the learners had. The focus in this article is, however, on four of these learners.

The Research Site

The research took place in a desegregated English-medium, formerly white, co-educational high school, situated in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. The school has a student population of around 1 020 learners who come from all over Johannesburg. The school is notable in the Gauteng province as being one of the top achieving public (read government) schools and has a fair representation of different racial groups. It styles itself as the 'most multicultural school' and as a true reflection of 'what a multiracial school could be and what it should be' (Interview with the Principal). While there has been a considerable change in learner demographics in the school since the demise of apartheid, there has not been a similar transformation at the staffing level, with the majority of teachers remaining white.

The Learners

All the learners selected study isiZulu as an additional language rather than Afrikaans, the other additional language offered at the school. In the eyes of the teachers and the school administration, attending the isiZulu class gives these learners a common identity, together with other classmates who were in the same isiZulu class in Grade 8 and 9. According to the Principal and their English teacher, learners in the isiZulu class are notorious for always being in trouble and being generally 'unruly'. As a result, they have been positioned as a problematic group, carrying a history of being uncontrollable learners. The English teacher explained why a number of learners from this problematic Grade 9 class performed poorly:

> **Ms Jones**:[4] I mean they fail English, not because of their ability; they fail English because they never hand anything in and they don't do the work and they don't want to be here at all . . . (Interview with English Teacher, Ms Jones).

The Principal stated further that the complicated timetabling the school has for Grade 10 is largely necessitated by the need to break down undesirable sub-cultures that emerge from having a homogeneous group that speaks the same African language and understands one another well.

In the next section, an analysis of the four learners, namely Thabo, Teboho, Anna and Sello (not their actual names) is presented.

Thabo is an African learner residing in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. His reported home language is Xhosa, with English and isiZulu also being used at home. He is a very lively student frequently taking part in class discussions, asking questions and fond of passing witty commentary, while the teacher or other learners speak. He was observed as being a fluent speaker of English in his interactions in the classroom and in informal spaces, as well as in interviews. He demonstrated a high proficiency in African languages such as Xhosa, isiZulu and Sesotho and was frequently heard to code-switch with friends. He constantly emphasized his African identity and reported that he associates mainly with fellow 'black' learners[5] (as opposed to 'white' learners). A scene that took place during one particular break-time illustrates this:

> **Thabo**: Have you seen the guys I hang around with?
> **Researcher**: You mean those? (pointing to a group of African and white learners)
> **Thabo**: No, not those. I hang out with black people.
> **Researcher**: Like who? Teboho?
> **Thabo**: No, I only hang out with Teboho in class.
> (Field Notes, Day 15 27/07/05, Break-time)

Though the African learners in the group indicated by the researcher are part of the group with which Thabo was observed to keep company, he denied 'hanging out' with them, because they were among the white learners. Although he was seen with Teboho both inside and outside the classroom, he denied that this friendship goes beyond the

classroom. In the interview with Thabo, he elaborated that he 'chills' with Teboho only 'sometimes', because Teboho in school 'chills with *those* white people' (Interview with Thabo, my emphasis). When asked who he 'hangs around with' at school he explained:

> **Thabo**: Me, I hang around with . . . basically me it's, it's not mostly a racial thing but me I choose to hang around black people because . . . they say things that you can relate to and we understand each other, you know, because basically when you are chilling around white people you speak English all the time. (Interview with Thabo)

Here, language becomes an important factor in deciding who is included or excluded from a friendship group and the exclusive usage of English seems to be a factor in Thabo's decision to avoid friendship groups with white learners. 'Whiteness' here is clearly the 'other' ('those' white people), equated with the use of English. Rejection of 'whiteness' by implication seems to be a rejection of English as well. Further, Thabo excludes Teboho from his admitted friendship group and positions the latter in his out-group for 'crossing over' in terms of the people with whom he associates. Coombes and Brah (2000) argue that people who hold essentialist notions of purity usually frown upon boundary crossing. Being an 'African' from Thabo's perspective means associating only with 'black people' who do not speak English 'all the time' and whose world of experience is similar to one's own (cf. Gaganakis 1992). However, Thabo is inconsistent in the essentialist position – although he tries to present a unitary narrative of self (as African) in claiming that he does not 'chill' with Teboho, yet he does. The post-modern subject, as Hall argues, 'assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent "self"' (Hall 1992a, 277).

In a focus group interview, Thabo stated that when learners make a mistake while speaking English they are laughed at:

> **Thabo**: Sometimes I make a mistake, you know, and *bayangihleka* [they laugh at me].
> **Researcher**: What sorts of mistakes do you make?
> **Thabo**: Like last year in English we had this other teacher who taught us English right, so *manje* [now], because we were learning new words, I don't know how to pronounce these things . . . you know and they laugh . . . but it is okay you know, I'm not scared to make mistakes. (Focus Group Interview)

While he puts himself in the position of the underdog in terms of proficiency in English, Thabo confidently declared in the individual interview that he corrects those learners who do not speak English well:

> **Thabo**: I have to do my bit, so I'm going to correct those people who speak wrong. (Interview with Thabo)

Thabo's observed verbal behaviour contradicts the way he positions himself as a learner who struggles with English. He was observed to have not only a wide vocabulary and a demonstrable knowledge of the conventions of the English language, but also remarkable creativity and spontaneity in his use of English. In a context where good proficiency in English seems to be a marker of assimilation, Thabo's positioning of himself as a learner who struggles with English is a way of distancing himself from those who have been assimilated into the mainstream. Rochelle Kapp remarks on a study conducted in a township school, that appearing to be too 'invested' in English may earn a learner derision for aspiring to 'white' norms (2000, 253). Thabo's performance of his identities in this instance reveals the way in which individuals are usually unaware of their multifaceted identities (Hall 1992a). Assertion by individuals of a seemingly consistent identity is normal, for such assertions are important in the person's construction of a coherent self. In Thabo's case, his identity is constructed around the idea of 'Africanness'. It is significant that Thabo resides in the suburbs, a phenomenon with connotations of 'whiteness', and thus perhaps feels more compelled to perform his 'Africanness'.

Thabo also stated that there were a number of accents used by learners in the school that he called 'Afrikaans accents', 'African accents' and 'normal English accents'. Interestingly, he describes his accent as an 'English, English accent'. He justifies this by saying he lives in the suburbs and 'you can't go to the suburbs with an African accent . . . ' (Interview with Thabo). Thabo here creates a separate category for himself in terms of where his accent belongs. This seems to be as a result of his refusal to identify with any of the categories he names. While on many occasions he confidently asserted his 'African' identity, he resists it when it comes into conflict with the perceived status that goes with the area of residence. For him, speaking English with an African accent does not accord with living in the suburbs, as varieties such as Black South African English (BSAfE) are usually stigmatised and classified in terms of deficit discourses (cf. Gough 1996). Studies by Gaganakis (1992), Kapp (2000) and Rudwick (2004) tried to capture the township-suburban dichotomy in South Africa as it relates to perceptions of the differing worlds of experience and the effect this has on language use. In this dichotomy, learners from townships are positioned as being deficient speakers and users of English, whereas their counterparts from the suburbs are positioned as competent speakers and users of English. In the next section, there is an analysis of Teboho who, unlike Thabo, resides in a township.

Teboho is an African learner residing in Soweto, a large township south of Johannesburg, who has been at this high school since Grade 8. He reported his home language to be Sesotho and that he speaks Sesotho and English at home. Like Thabo, Teboho is a very lively learner and participates actively in classroom activities. Though he is at times quite disruptive, his natural charm and ease of manner make him likeable to most teachers and learners. The Geography teacher remarked that Teboho is a good student, since he participates in classroom activities and does not fail, though she felt he could do better if he paid more attention (Field Notes Day 3 25/05/2005).

Like Thabo, Teboho was observed to be a proficient user of English and other languages. The History teacher, Ms Hamilton, views Teboho to be a good user of English in spite of not being a first language speaker of English. She added:

> **Ms Hamilton**: I mean my top children in that class . . . are not English first language learners and they get the highest marks . . . there are two white girls there Amy and Susan, they aren't the top students in the class, it's Zweli and Teboho . . . their English is good, very good. I mean they, they can write English better than those girls who are white and that's their first language English. (Interview with History Teacher Ms Hamilton, 12/08/2005)

Quite clearly, the history teacher sees Teboho as a good student and a competent user of English. However, what is not clear from Ms Hamilton's remarks, is whether Zweli and Teboho's abilities to write well in English (academic literacy) also extend to an ability to speak what she considers to be good English.

Although Teboho recognizes the existence of many accents with which English is spoken in the school, such as 'an Indian accent, coloured, black, white . . . ' (Interview with Teboho), like Thabo, he does not define himself in terms of the categories he has observed, since he reported that he does not think that he has an accent. One of the legacies of the apartheid era, as stated earlier, is the appropriation (internalisation) of the essentialist categorisation of varieties of English according to 'race'. While this categorisation is based on an assumed link between race and language in apartheid ideology, such racially constituted categories (cf. Hall 1992b) are ideologically suspicious and based on an illusion of a neat alignment of language and race (Makoni 1999; McKinney, this issue). Teboho's resistance to being perceived as having a particular racialized accent is significant when we realise that the idea of 'racial' stability and unified identities is illusory (Hall 1992a; 1992b; Distiller and Steyn 2004).

When asked about the existence of a 'model C accent', a popular descriptor[6] that is used to label accents used by black learners in former model C schools who speak a particular brand of English, Teboho retorted:

> **Teboho**: I don't know what Black English is . . . no I speak normally, thank you very much!
> **Researcher**: But you said that there is a black accent . . .
> **Teboho**: Like the way *they* talk, not the actual words they say.
> (Interviews with Teboho, my emphasis)

Teboho here resists being positioned as having some fixed identity (cf. Hall 1992b) such as 'black', 'African' or 'Sotho' in relation to language. As Alexander (2002) claims, categories such as 'African', 'Afrikaner', 'coloured' or 'Zulu', amongst others, are hotly contested in South Africa today. This resistance to being positioned as having a black accent seems to emanate from a rejection of the ensemble of meanings associated with these identities. In the discussion on model C accents, Teboho confidently explicated model C as meaning:

Teboho: One of them boys *ba kenang di*-schools *ka daar* not *ko kasie*. [One of them boys who go to schools, which are not in the township.]
(Interview with Teboho)

Although Teboho resists the stigmatised township black identity, with its associations of poor use of English, he embraces the resources that the urban/township environment affords through code switching between English and varieties that have sprang up in the polyglot townships of Gauteng (Slabbert and Finlayson 2000). Though he lives in Soweto, Teboho has attended primary school and secondary school in the suburb in which this school is located, and has acquired identities that cannot be fixed unproblematically (Hall 1992a; Zegeye 2001). His perception of the way he uses English similarly resists any constructions of a fixed identity. While he sees others as speaking 'Afrikaans English', 'Sesotho English', 'slang' or 'proper English', he feels he speaks in 'everyway'. He stated further that English should not be used in a particular way and claimed that 'We speak however I want, when I want' (Interview with Teboho). Teboho's self-positioning in the way he imagines himself as a user of English seems to resist constructions of a fixed identity, affiliating rather with one that is fluid and context dependent (Hall 1992a; Weedon 1997; Zegeye 2001).

The next section presents the case study of Anna and introduces ideas on imagined communities of language speakers (Kanno and Norton 2003) and perceptions of 'loss' of an African identity, as a result of using English. Anna is an African learner who has also been at this high school since Grade 8. She resides in the suburb where the school is located with her mother and her 'guardians', for whom her mother works as a domestic worker. She made an interesting distinction between 'mother tongue' and 'first language' by reporting her 'mother tongue' as Sepedi, which she said she 'can't really speak', and English as her 'first language', since it was the first language she learnt (Interview with Anna).[7] Anna, like Thabo and Teboho, was observed to be an active learner who contributed to and participated in a number of classroom activities, and extramural activities such as athletics. The Geography teacher said that Anna is 'intelligent' and participates effectively in class, but is quite moody (Field Notes Day 3 25/05/2005). In spite of being an active learner in the classroom, Anna was always being reminded by the teachers that she should be more serious about her work. On several occasions she was found not to be on task and not having notes.

Anna was observed to be a very competent speaker of English. However, although she is fluent in isiZulu,[8] and possibly other South African languages, she was rarely heard speaking African languages. She reported that learning through the medium of English is easy for her, as she 'grew up with English' (Interview with Anna), but stated that there are other learners who struggle to cope in English at school:

Anna: If you look around here there are some kids from the townships, you see, and *ko kasie* [in the township] they speak the Zulu and what what . . . whereas the ones from the suburbs *we* are used to speaking English *full time.*
(Interview with Anna, my emphasis)

In Anna's opinion, other learners experience problems in learning through the medium of English as they have limited opportunities to practise English, since they use their different home languages at home and socially (on the streets). Anna's statement reveals a common positioning of learners coming from the suburbs as being competent speakers of English, and those from townships, in terms of the deficit discourses, being marked by a less than proficient competence in English (cf. McKay and Chick 2001; Rudwick 2004). Anna's use of the pronoun 'we' is significant as it shows how she imagines herself to be linked to (Kanno and Norton 2003), and identifies with the group from the suburbs and suburban schooling, with an assumed better competence of English. She thus speaks English all the time ('full time'), unlike the group from the townships. However, it is doubtful that a clear distinction exists between learners from the townships and those from the suburbs, in terms of proficiency in English. As discussed earlier, Teboho who lives in Soweto resists this positioning as, in spite of his residing in a township, he is a proficient user of English. Nevertheless, one cannot disagree that learners with more opportunities to use and to practise English are more likely to do better in an English medium school than those with fewer opportunities to use English.[9] As Norton (2000) argues, an individual's identities cannot be conceptualised away from social and economic constraints that shape identity positions available to the individual.

Anna reported that she did not experience any problems in learning through the medium of English and that, in her view English is a good medium of communication between different people. However, she also stated that

> [i]n another way it's bad, because people are forgetting their roots and their own languages, because they are conforming to English . . . when you learn English you also learn the culture of the English . . . and people become more modern and more westernised instead of sticking true to their roots. I don't know . . . it contradicts.
> (Interview with Anna)

Here, Anna expresses ambivalent feelings about the privileged position English occupies in South Africa and globally. In spite of its communicative advantages, her opinion is that learning English also leads to a loss of an ethno linguistic identity (cf. Rudwick 2004). Rudwick (2004) states that a number of Africanist scholars passionate about the cultural liberation of Africa, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, see an inseparable relationship between language and culture. Rudwick's study shows a strong identification of isiZulu first language learners with isiZulu, which they perceived to be a cornerstone of 'Zuluness' and/or 'Africanness' (Rudwick 2004, 164). The 'loss' of an ethno linguistic identity is experienced at a personal level for Anna, as she reported lacking proficiency in her mother tongue, Sepedi, which makes her feel as if she has lost her culture.

At another level, though, it is important to reflect on the kind of clichéd responses that respondents may give in research studies. For instance, Anna's observation that 'people are forgetting their roots . . . ' as a result of learning English (Interview with Anna) should not be read too literally. In most cases, the distinction between the traditional ('roots') and modernity that is couched in static views of culture is unproblematically

appropriated. One might argue, in this instance, that Anna does not show an awareness of the complexity and fluidity of culture and identity, but merely reproduces the clichéd categories where the 'modern' is synonymous with the 'western'. Furthermore, the cliché Anna reproduces does not seem to ring true even to herself, as there is no real sense of loss, given that she is rooted in modernity where knowledge of English gives one access to all important domains. Anna states that even she herself is not sure of what she is saying ('I don't know . . . it contradicts').

Finally, the case study of Sello is presented. He is quite different from the learners discussed thus far, in that he does not experience English as a major part of his identity. Although Sello was part of the selected group of participants who could be argued to be the 'best performers', that is, the group that made itself visible in class and was always eager to participate in classroom talk, he was observed to be on the periphery of this group. Unlike the other three research participants who reported using English at home either as their first, second or third language, Sello stated that he does not use English at home at all. He stated that at home he uses only his first language, Sesotho, while at school with friends he used Sesotho, isiZulu and English. Sello was observed frequently code-switching between English and other languages with friends, both in and outside the classroom. During a guided tour Sello gave the researcher of the school on day five of his observation (30/05/2005), the practice of code-switching was an evident part of his in-group use of language. On the tour, he frequently stopped to greet and chat to some of his friends in a mixture of English, Sesotho, isiZulu and 'Tsotsi-taal'.[10] He also introduced the researcher to two of his friends, Zingi, a boy whom he described as a 'childhood friend' and Dimakatso, a girl with whom he once shared a locker (Field Notes, Day 5 30/05/2005).

As already stated, most of the research participants were observed to be good users of English. However, this generally 'rosy' picture cannot be extrapolated to the experiences of all learners at the school. The History teacher pointed out that Sello is among the learners who struggle with English:

> Sello is also battling; but his English is not that bad orally, you know, when you speak to him he is okay, but when he writes he doesn't write very well. Nabeelah is battling but I mean she is Indian. English is her first language, but she is also battling . . .
> (Interview with History teacher Ms Hamilton)

The researcher's impressions of Sello from his observations in class and the recorded interview with him are similar to the way he is positioned by the History teacher. While he could express himself in English and make himself understood, he lacked the variety and spontaneity of the other research participants. The History teacher's statement about who is 'battling' is significant in bringing to the fore the stereotyping of the second language speaker that is prevalent in a number of classrooms. In her statement, one observes the view that the first language speaker is not expected to struggle with English. From Sello's perspective, the importance of English lies in its position as a language of communication in the multilingual environment of the school, which is

typical of South Africa's linguistic landscape, where multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception (Murray 2002). As he puts it, English is necessary because

> if you don't have one language and you all study like for example let's say both of us are in a class *ne*, and there is no one language which we communicate in, you talk in Sepedi and I talk in Venda [Tshivenda], you see, we won't get along and there is no progress.
> (Interview with Sello)

Further, Sello sees English as necessary in a school that positions itself as an 'English school' (Interview with Principal) stating that

> this is quite an academic school and normally, usually English is taken as first language and you can't drop it too . . . you can't come to here without knowing knowledge of English.
> (Interview with Sello)

Having knowledge of 'proper English' for Sello is a way of reflecting the identity of the school as an 'academic school' that is also an 'English school'. Another significant issue in the above quotation is what Canagarajah (1999) sees as the absence of choice on the part of learners not to choose English in places where it has become strongly rooted in society. Given the power of English in South Africa (Granville et al. 1998), learners have little 'choice' (cf. Pennycook 1994, 74) but to learn it properly, as the choice not to learn it properly may significantly limit their educational advancement and mobility in wider society. One of the most significant findings from the interview with Sello is that he does not experience English as a major part of his identity (cf. Rudwick 2004). For him, English is merely a pragmatic tool that facilitates communication in a multilingual environment and is also the language of the school.

Despite recognizing the need to learn English in the school, Sello also expressed ambivalence in learning through the medium of English. He stated:

> I don't really prefer studying in English . . . I just want to know Standard English like how to communicate . . .
> (Interview with Sello)

This ambivalence stems from a fear of making mistakes (cf. Rudwick 2004). He stated that he faces problems in learning through the medium of English:

> Because they use words that I don't understand and I will like be confused, you see, and I would get things wrong.
> (Interview with Sello)

One of the things observed almost immediately in the English class that Sello and the other research participants attended was the high level at which the English language was pitched. A number of 'big' words, the relevance and appropriateness of which were at times not immediately apparent, were a common feature of the English lessons. In an interview, the English teacher admitted, in a moment of personal reflection, that

> I think sometimes the words that I use might be too big, might be too complicated, might leave some kids behind and then they switch off . . .
> (Interview with Ms Jones)

Although Sello stated that he does not enjoy learning through the medium of English ('I don't really prefer studying in English'), neither does he feel it would be a good idea to study exclusively through the medium of an African language such as isiZulu. For Sello, a number of different languages should be used as the medium of learning and teaching, with code switching being the norm: 'not like a lot of Zulu . . . just in-and-out, in-and-out like other languages.' (Interview with Sello) These remarks infer a direct comment on the need to integrate different languages in education. Though Sello's remarks may seem contradictory in expressing reservations about English, while not necessarily advocating the use of a specific African language as the medium of instruction, they appear to express the different identity positions that a multilingual person adopts. Although learners are aware of the power of English as the language of important domains and of personal advancement, there is also an awareness of the significance of other languages as a result of the different attachments their users have to them (cf. Rudwick 2004). According to Canagarajah (1999), the contradictions that individuals are usually faced with are symptomatic of the complex linguistic interconnections that characterize multilingual, former colonial states.

Conclusion

English maintains its position as the language of choice for most learners, for not only does it promise greater mobility in society, fluency therein is also a signifier of belonging to the particular community of a school variously positioned as an 'English school'. Speaking a particular brand of English is important for the learners not only within the school, but also outside it, in distinguishing themselves as being suburban schooled. It is surprising that the newspaper columnist quoted earlier condemns the DJ for speaking without a 'hint of blackness', while also describing herself as 'one of those kids' who attended high school in post-apartheid South Africa where she developed her 'so-called model C accent'.

Canagarajah (1999) argues that the significance of post-structuralist theory in thinking about language and identity lies in its recognition of a range of subject positions that are available to an individual. According to Canagarajah, the importance of post-structuralist theory lies not only in its conception of identity as fluid and negotiable, but also in providing subjects with possibilities of 'forming new identities and gaining a critical consciousness by resisting dominant discourses' (Canagarajah 1999, 31).

In a school which styles itself as an 'English school' and thus where English has a special status, multiple identities reveal themselves in the way learners position themselves and are positioned by others in relation to the language. Although the learners are aware that English is spoken in different ways by different users, both Thabo and

Teboho do not position themselves in terms of the fixed categories they observe. They construct separate categories for themselves that defy any kind of neat categorisation.

Using Anna's case, the argument has been that comments that respondents make in research studies about language, culture and identity must not be taken uncritically as, in many cases, distinctions couched in static views of culture are unproblematically appropriated to explain phenomena that may not be characterized by the boundedness and fixity imagined. The different, seemingly contradictory identity positions that multilingual individuals may occupy are not irrational, given their different subjective investments and the identity positions in which the phenomenon of multilingualism implicates them.

This article raises some implications for schooling in South Africa in the post-apartheid era. First, there is a need to see English realistically as 'a commodity in great demand' (Young 2001, 252). Not only is English tied to the aspirations of the language learner, but, following a post-structuralist view, it is also one of the sites where the sense of self is constructed and contested. This article provides insights into processes of inclusion and exclusion that may be occurring in schools, through language. As highlighted earlier, proficiency in English plays, and will continue to play, an important role in how students imagine themselves as members of the school community that positions itself as an 'English school'. Furthermore, popular descriptions of how students speak English impact on how they view themselves as members of the community of desegregated schooling. Failure to master the so-called 'model C accent' may lead to insecurity and feelings of being an outsider that are precursors of educational failure.

Notes

1 *Sowetan* Friday December 1, 2006

2 While recognizing the problematic nature of racial categories, I use categories 'African', 'coloured', 'Indian' and 'white' for purposes of identification, clarification and analysis.

3 Project funded by South Africa-Netherlands Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) in the department of Applied English Language Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, entitled 'Language, Identity and Learning: exploring language practices of children/youth attending desegregated schools in urban South Africa'.

4 The names of the school and those of learners and educators have been changed to protect their identities.

5 I retain categories used by the participants themselves.

6 For instance, in newspapers (e.g. *Sowetan* December 1 2006) and popular youth magazines such as *Y-Mag* (cf. McKinney 2005).

7 The distinction between first language and mother tongue was made by Anna in response to the question 'What is your home language?'

8 Analysis of the naturally occurring data revealed Anna code switching between English and isiZulu in directing a presentation she and other learners were supposed to make in the isiZulu class.

9 Nonetheless, it must be noted that living in the suburbs does not guarantee more opportunities to use English, unless a learner is suburban schooled.

10 Tsotsi-taal is a hybrid language mainly spoken in townships of Gauteng province, South Africa.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Student Publication Project in the Graduate School, Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand for the opportunity to develop this paper for publication.

References

Alexander, N. 2002. *An ordinary country: Issues in the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa.* Scottville: University of Natal Press.

Bainbridge, W. S. 2001. Small group research. In *Concise encyclopedia of sociolinguistics*, ed. R. Mesthrie, 6–9. Oxford: Elsevier.

Canagarajah, S. 1999. *Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chick, K. 2001. Constructing a multicultural national identity: South African classrooms as sites of struggle between competing discourses. *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics* 17 (1–2): 27–45.

Coombes, A.E. and A. Brah. 2000. Introduction: The conundrum of mixing. In *Hybridity and its discontents*: *Politics*, *science*, *culture*, ed. A. Brah and A.E. Coombes, 1–16. London and New York: Routledge.

Davies, B. and R. Harrè. 1990. Positioning: the discursive production of selves, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1): 43-63.

De Klerk, V. and D. Gough. 2002. Black South African English. In *Language in South Africa*, ed. R. Mesthrie. 356–378. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Distiller, N. and M. Steyn, eds. 2004. Introduction: Under construction. In *Under construction: Race and identity in South Africa today*. 1–11. Sandton: Heinemann.

Dolby, N. 1999. Youth and the global popular: The politics and practices of race in South Africa. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 (3): 291–309.

___. 2001. *Constructing race: Youth, identity, and popular culture in South Africa*. State University of New York Press: Albany.

Gaganakis, M. 1992. Language and ethnic group relations in non-racial schools. *The English Academy Review*, 9: 46–55.

Gough, D. 1996. Black English in South Africa. *Focus on South Africa*, ed V. de Klerk, 53–77. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins.

Granville, S., H. Janks, M. Mphahlele, Y. Reed, P. Watson, M. Joseph and E. Ramani. 1998. English with or without g(u)ilt: A position paper on the Language in Education Policy for South Africa, *Language and Education* 12 (4): 254–272.

Hall, S. 1992a. The question of cultural identity. In *Modernity and its futures*, eds. S. Hall, D. Held and T. McGrew, 274–325. Cambridge: Polity Press.

___. 1992b. New ethnicities. In *'Race', culture and difference*, ed. J. Donald and A. Rattansi, 252–259. London: Sage.

Kamwangamalu, N. 2003. Globalisation of English, and language maintenance and shift in South Africa. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 164: 65–81.

Kanno, Y. and B. Norton. 2003. Imagined communities and educational possibilities: Introduction. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* 2 (4): 241–249.

Kapp, R. 2000. 'With English you can go everywhere': An analysis of the role and status of English at a former DET school. *Journal of Education* 25: 227–259.

Makoni, S. 1999. Book Review, Vivian De Klerk, Editor: *Focus on South Africa*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 19XX. Varieties of English around the world, 1997.325 pp. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 136: 35–140.

McKay, S. and K. Chick. 2001. Positioning learners in post-apartheid South African schools: A case study of selected multicultural Durban schools. *Linguistics and Education* 12 (4): 393–408.

McKinney, C. 2005. *Language, identity and (subverting) assimilation in a South African desegregated suburban school*. Paper presented at the Southern African Comparative Education Society (SACHES) Conference, Dar es Salaam, September.

Motuba, I. 2006. Elana, drop the phoney twang, girl. *Sowetan,* 1 December.

Murray, S. 2002. Language issues in South African education: An overview. In *Language in South Africa*, ed. R. Mesthrie, 434–448. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ndebele, N. S. 1986. *The English language and social change in South Africa*. Keynote paper delivered at the Jubilee Conference of the English Academy of Southern Africa, 4–6 September.

Norton, B. 2000. *Identity and language learning*: *Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education.

Pennycook, A. 1994. *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London: Longman.

___. 2004. Performativity and language studies. *Critical Inquiry in Language studies: An International Journal* 1 (1): 1–19.

Phillipson, R. 1992. *Linguistic imperialism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rudwick, S. 2004. Zulu, we need [it] for our culture: Umlazi adolescents in the post-apartheid state. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Languages Studies* 22 (3–4): 159–172.

Slabbert, S. and R. Finlayson. 2000. 'I'm a cleva!': The linguistic makeup of identity in a South African urban environment. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 144: 119–135.

Soudien, C. and Y. Sayed. 2003. Integrating South African schools? Some preliminary findings. *IDS Bulletin* 34 (1): 29–42.

Soudien, C. 2004. Constituting the class: An analysis of the process of 'integration' in South African schools. In *Changing class: Education and social change in post-apartheid South Africa*, ed. L. Chisholm, 89–113. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Sujee, M. 2004. Deracialisation of Gauteng schools – a quantitative analysis. In *Reflections on school integration colloquium proceedings*, eds. M. Nkomo, C. McKinney and L. Chisholm, 43–59. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Vally, S. and Y. Dalamba. 1999. *Racism, racial integration and desegregation in South African public secondary schools.* Johannesburg: Report by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC).

Vinjevold, P. 1999. Language issues in South African classrooms. In *Getting learning right*, eds. N. Taylor and P. Vinjevold, 205–226. Wits: The Joint Education Trust.

Weedon, C. 1997. *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wright, C. 1992. Early education: Multiracial primary classrooms. In *Racism and education*: *Structures and strategies*, eds. D. Gill, B. Mayor and M. Blair, 5–41. London: Sage.

Young, D. 2001. Why 'applied language studies' and not 'applied linguistics'? In *Freedom and discipline essays in applied linguistics from Southern Africa*, eds. E. Ridge, S. Makoni and S. G. M. Ridge, 221–261. New Delhi: Bahri.

Zegeye, A. ed. 2001. General introduction. *Social identities in the new South Africa.* 1–23. Cape Town: Kwela Books.