A Brief Overview of Language Education Problems Related to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in South Africa

Thandeka Maine

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Abstract. Bilingualism and/or multilingualism is a global phenomenon today. It has social, educational, economical and political implications for every society. South Africa is thus no exception, as its population is multilingual and multicultural. The diversity of this rainbow nation however brings with it certain challenges and responsibilities. As a microcosm of society, all professionals within the educational sphere also have to constantly face the challenges that this diversity brings. They have to constantly find creative ways to accurately identify and where necessary remediate the problems that may be a product of this multilingual and multicultural context. The threshold theory provides an avenue that can be used in this regard.

The threshold theory was originally developed and used to explore the conditions under which bilingualism promotes or negatively impacts on cognitive growth (Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukamaa, 1977; Cummins, 1976 in Baker, 1989). A diagrammatic representation is used to demonstrate how the level of the bilingual child will determine the child’s cognitive development and language proficiency.

Although the content of this theory is relevant for all professionals that work with bilingual children, this overview is made from the perspective of a speech-language pathologist (SLP). As a SLP, similarly to other professionals in the educational field, the challenge is the appropriate professional assessment and management of our diverse multilingual and multicultural clientele (Goldstein, 2004; Penn, 2000; Pillay, 1997). The threshold theory provides a useful framework for the understanding of the heterogeneous nature of this clientele and the implications of the diversity of this population.

This paper will thus use the threshold theory to paint a picture of the complexity of the clientele that the SLP is presented with and explore how this information can be effectively utilised for an accurate, ethical and holistic assessment and intervention of the bilingual child.