

# How not to decolonize: old debates, new ideas

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Since the heady days of the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements, the old debate about decolonizing education has gained fresh momentum in South Africa so much so that it is now in danger of being considered by some to be a mere ideological or political fad. Yet, the debate remains crucial to the ongoing efforts to transform higher education in South Africa and Africa as a whole which was the focus of a recently concluded international conference organized by the Arts Faculty of the University of Zululand at the Zululand Science Centre in Richards Bay.

As some delegates noted, it is problematic that we do not seem to know whether we are making progress in this decades-old struggle or whether we are just talking in order to hear the sounds of our fancy educated accents. But how can we move forward if we are still not yet clear – as it seems – about what it actually means to decolonize education?

The conference's opening keynote address repeated the popular argument that the use of English as medium of education and dominant language of commerce is the single most important problem. This apparent fixation on the language question, in my view, is responsible for our sense of stagnation because while we all know that we should be teaching and learning in our mother tongues in an ideal situation, we also know that making that shift is herculean. The result is that after exploring the issue in profound philosophical detail, we invariably end up in despair.

But there could very well be a way out of our apparent neurosis. While we all agree that the imposition of foreign languages played a major role in colonization, it is important to note that colonization as a complex system of political, economic, social and cultural domination goes far beyond language. We also need to remember that the power of neo-colonization today resides far more in its psychological effects than on its apparent material manifestations.

In other words, to be colonized is not so much to associate with what is considered to be Western culture and language. Rather, it is in the belief – whether expressed consciously or not – that indigenous ideas, cultures, languages and knowledge systems are inherently inferior to those of the West. It is my view that if we do not confront this problematic mindset, the decolonization project will never succeed even if we succeed in making local languages our major mediums of education and commerce.

Indeed, we know of Africans with very high levels of Western education and fluency in European languages who, incidentally, have been in the forefront of decolonization over the decades. In this regard, people like Chinua Achebe, Franz Fanon, Eskia Mphahlele, Steve Biko and Ngugi wa Thiong'o quickly come to mind. There are also, arguably, many Africans who do not speak English but who still perceive Western cultures to be intrinsically superior to indigenous cultures, due perhaps to their having been at the receiving end of centuries of domination. There are also those who seem to have believed the colonial lies that Africa has contributed either too little or nothing to global human development and that indigenous African knowledge systems and cultures are incompatible with modernity. As long as such negative ideas and attitudes persist, the decolonization project will remain stalled regardless of what language is used to teach, learn and trade.

This is where radical and incremental revisions of the curriculum, especially in disciplines such as philosophy, history, literature and politics, become far more urgent and imperative than, for example, the drawn-out project of making indigenous languages sole mediums of education. It is actually

disconcerting that our core humanities and arts curricula are still apparently overloaded, in 2017, with vintage European theories and source texts even though modern Africans have been producing exceptional scholarship for decades.

And while most, if not all, of these works are in European languages, many – such as those by Fanon, Achebe, Ngugi and Biko – have helped us understand and resist colonial and neo-colonial domination in significant ways. This clearly demonstrates the ways in which foreign languages may be effectively appropriated to serve the purposes of decolonization in spite of the historical baggage that comes with these languages.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, such strategic and subversive use of the colonial linguistic and educational heritage can play a crucial role in helping us generate and mobilize the social and political will required to promote the use of indigenous African languages in all spheres of modern life, both within and outside Africa.

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