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Enablers and barriers to multilingualism in South African university classrooms

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Abstract: Despite a robust national language policy, multilingual learning has yet to make headway in South African universities. In addressing the gap between the language of instruction and the languages South African university students are competent in, this article begins with a brief review of current national and institutional policy positions and recent multilingual learning theoretical discussions at university. Lines of thinking that emerge include: significance of academic literacy and how it underpins university studies; and separatist solutions where academic literacy is taught in dedicated modules. However the uncertain academic status of African language studies and negative attitudes to its speakers may compromise the potential of multilingual initiatives in universities. To solicit student impressions on the actuality and potential of multilingualism in universities, a focus group discussion was conducted with 15 students in the School of Agricultural Sciences and Agribusiness at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Students concurred that trying to process information in a language they were not competent in limited their understanding of lectures. Attempts to cope using mother tongue in study groups was limited by lack of terminology and conceptual equivalents, however, being taught in mother tongue was unacceptable to students because their aim was to acquire better English at university. In addition, foreign students expressed anxiety that multilingualism might disadvantage them.

The study concludes that multilingualism could assist students in developing academic literacy and academic discourse but students seem blind to this advantage.

Introduction

Our concerns in this article originate from experience with Food Security students in the Faculty of Science and Agriculture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), where the first-named researcher, as Dean’s Assistant, was responsible for students placed in the Academic Risk and Academic Probation categories. These students struggled with epistemological access to academic learning, most especially where the language of instruction was markedly at variance with their own competence in that language. Although it must be said at the outset that more than just linguistic issues are involved here and that deeper issues of literacy and discourse come very significantly into play, ongoing conversations with these students nonetheless repeatedly brought up the difficulties they experienced in understanding through the dominant medium of English. These impressions prompted a more formal exploration of how language issues impact on students’ learning experiences in a multilingual campus environment. This article considers, therefore, how the discourse of multilingualism plays out in a multilingual higher education context, and is founded upon an analysis of conversations with students at different levels of study concerning the linguistic challenges they have experienced in engaging with their studies. The analysis is also contextualised in terms of the current literature on multilingual teaching and learning especially recent work on by Jacob (2006) and Thomson (2009). Research by these scholars suggests that epistemological access for English Additional Language students is best promoted through an integrated approach to academic literacy, but an added level of complexity is introduced when students of differing language competence must endeavour to amalgamate subject content and the special demands of academic literacy. These accumulating complexities of multilingual learning are what this study endeavoured to investigate.
Multilingualism and academic literacy

Recent discussions on multilingualism and academic literacy in higher education tend to follow one or another of three possible approaches: an integrationist approach, as advocated by Jacobs (2006) and Thomson (2009); a separatist approach, advocated by scholars such as Mgqwashu (2008, 2009), which argues that development of epistemological access should focus on specific modules such as a literacy in English module; and a multilingual approach with simultaneous development of mother tongue and English competencies, which enables learning and teaching in a language optimally understood by students.

Academic literacy can be defined as knowing how to act and speak in academic discourse (Boughey, 2000: 281). A case in point would be the capacity to understand the kind of language used in an abstract text. Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956) of cognitive processes outlines a hierarchy of competencies, where at the most basic level all that is required of a student is direct learning and comprehension, to be followed by progressively higher order competencies, such as the ability to analyse, evaluate and synthesise. Considering language as a tool for instruction, an obvious necessity is that the specific language (English, German, isiZulu, etc., as the case may be) should be understood by the student. But scholars such as Gee (1990: 143) make it clear that, over and above language per se, what also comes into play is discourse (and specifically academic discourse): definable as a socially accepted association among ways of using language, such as the distinctive way language is used in academia (Gee, 1990: 143).

Thomson’s (2009) study explores the personal experiences of a small group of students, describing what it is like to acquire academic literacy and how much its mode of delivery mattered to them. What emerges is that the difficulties which students experience in reading and writing academic texts are mostly due to the autonomous model of literacy which expects students to acquire ‘situated practices’ and absorb ‘situated meanings’ from a text (Thomson, 2009: i). The alternative ideological model of literacy puts the focus on empowering people to acquire the skills that will deliver success in the academic world. Multilingualism clearly affords students some degree of access in understanding academic work, but will be limited by inadequate command of academic discourse or academic literacy.

Boughey (2000) argues that academic literacy and discourse come as an extra burden for speakers of English as an additional language who are already struggling with weak language mastery, and that socio-economic backgrounds and contexts create still more constraints for them. Her comments are based on her experience of teaching English to students who speak English as an additional language at the University of Zululand, and their experiences will be familiar to many students at other universities in South Africa.

Scholars such as Bock (1988) and Mgqwashu (2008, 2009) advocate a separatist approach to academic literacy and epistemological access, with specifically designed modules in English for Academic Literacy, although Mgqwashu also warns that teaching academic literacy skills or grammatical rules in isolation without broader integration will achieve little. Boughey’s (2000) view, on the other hand, is that the development of academic literacy should be the end-goal of a degree course as opposed to a stand-alone module.

But while there is general agreement that academic literacy provides essential epistemological access to academic discourses, it remains all too evident that many students in South Africa fail to acquire academic literacy and that their deficiency is compounded by poor competency in English as a language of teaching and learning (LoLT) (Pretorius, 2002). Here, scholars such as Skutnabb-Kangas (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000), Heugh (2002) and Alexander (2005) argue that a multilingual approach can be valuable for fostering specific skills that students need to master as they progress towards academic literacy.

Following on the National Language in Education Policy promulgated in 1997, the South African Ministry of Education’s statement on Language Policy in Higher Education (LPHE) argues strongly for multilingualism and commits to the long-term development of indigenous African languages as languages of teaching and learning at tertiary level (Department of Education, 2005). In line with this policy, a Ministerial Committee was established in September 2003 to advise on the development of indigenous African languages as media of instruction in higher education. In pursuit of this
goal much still remains to be done, and meanwhile we take the position that academic literacy can be acquired and epistemological access is possible in any language, provided that adequate terminology and concepts exist to engage with academic discourse.

Multilingualism in higher education

Language policy for higher education in South Africa

Official language policy in South Africa for formal education has a somewhat conflicted history. The advent of democracy in 1994 set in motion complicated political manoeuvring on the LoLT, but schools with predominantly black African learners are still largely reliant on English as a language of instruction and on English-based resources. At tertiary level, institutions were tasked with designing their own language policies, but the National Plan for Higher Education advises quite explicitly that South African universities should be ‘unabashedly and unashamedly’ South African, and the most recent Higher Education Language Policy statement directly embraces the national strategy of building a non-racial society with equal official standing and respect for African languages. One more factor impacting on issues of LoLT has been the reconfiguration, over the past decade, of the tertiary landscape in South Africa through rationalisation and mergers of tertiary institutions (Beukes & Pienaar, 2009).

The 2005 Ministerial Committee Report on the development of indigenous African languages in higher education, which considered historical and legislative factors in nurturing language growth, warns that ‘a crisis is looming in the country regarding the preservation, maintenance and associated identity of our indigenous African languages’ (2005: 4), and attributes the anticipated crisis to the preference for English instead of African languages in formal communication in the private and public sectors and in general social practice. The Report notes that the development of indigenous languages as media of instruction in higher education requires systemic underpinning by the entire schooling system and enhanced public and social use of these languages in the daily lives of South Africans. The Report recommends that each higher education institution should be required to identify an indigenous African language of choice for initial development as a medium of instruction, and also that higher education institutions adopt a regional approach by deciding collectively on areas of specialty to be targeted for teaching and learning in a specific indigenous African language (Department of Education, 2005: 20).

A specific issue of concern mentioned in the Report is the decline in numbers of students who wish to study African languages, leading to the closure of African language departments in a number of higher education institutions. This echoes the concern expressed in the Ministry of Education document on Language Policy for Higher Education, which warns that

The future of South African languages as areas of academic study and research is a matter of serious concern. In particular, the importance of studying and mastering different South African languages for the development of a common sense of nationhood cannot be over-emphasised. Regrettably, enrolments in language programmes have declined in recent years resulting in the closure of several language departments. These developments, if not addressed, have the potential to jeopardise the future study of languages, literature and culture in our country.

Such a shift away from language studies also has serious implications for teacher training and the promotion of multilingualism in general and further education (2002: 8).

Put another way, this decline is another indicator of the difficulties that hinder the emergence of broadly multilingual academic and scientific discourse in South African universities and the acquisition of academic literacy by a multilingual student body.

To date, the implementation of multilingualism in South African universities remains limited. Among those which have made advances in this direction are North-West University (in Setswana, English, and Afrikaans), the University of Limpopo (in Sepedi and English) and the University of Johannesburg (in Sepedi, isiZulu, English, and Afrikaans). North-West University and the University of Johannesburg both won multilingualism language awards from the Pan South Africa Language Board in 2010.
Language proficiency of South African tertiary students and attitudes towards language

English Second Language (ESL) tertiary students in South Africa face a host of challenges. The majority of these students are from disadvantaged schooling backgrounds and struggle with inadequate proficiency in English (Pretorius, 2002). Such schools often fail to prepare learners for tertiary study. Nor are their problems confined to language per se, since some studies indicate that social class can be as much of an impediment for students as poor schooling, and scholars such as Gee (1990) insist that the decisive criterion for university success is literacy rather than language.

Nel (2005) notes that for many learners in South African schools, English is learned as a second or even third language even though it is the LoLT in the majority of classrooms and schools, although Setati et al. (2002) point out that ESL learners in urban areas may have the advantage that English is widely used in their immediate environment, exposing them to many opportunities to learn it from television or newspapers and the like. Rural learners are much less likely to benefit in this way. However, a recent study by Carol Thomson (2009) concludes that obstacles remained even when academic concepts were presented in the home language of the learner. First-language isiZulu students complained that they did ‘not know this isiZulu’, because it was ‘unlike the Zulu we speak everyday’ and reverted to the English texts. Not having been exposed to elevated forms of isiZulu, the students struggled with ‘academic’ isiZulu when they encountered it in academic discourse. Students argued that

It’s unlike the Zulu we speak everyday … I mean for instance how we speak [OK]. It’s quite a different subject, which you cannot talk to everybody … the man in the street. [Sure]. You see, you cannot talk about that thing to a man on the street because he is not interested in that, he is interested in communicative language [ok]. You see that is not communicative language, it’s an academic language. (Thomson, 2009: 182–183).

Overwhelmed by the volume of exposure to English language and of new terminology in their courses and modules, under-prepared students may resort to rote learning and memorisation as a survival strategy. One indicator of poor academic literacy is the dislike that many students express for writing essays – where lacking the confidence to elaborate an argument they simply copy chunks of text from a reference without understanding it and just changing a few words here and there.

In addition to poor language proficiency, negative attitudes to African languages exist which may compromise multilingual approaches. Obanya (1999) observes that there is a relatively high reluctance among black Africans to study their own languages, and we have already noted that this has been identified as a specific worry in South Africa. This reluctance can perhaps be understood if we consider that language is a powerful resource (Wright, 2002) and that people quite likely know whether or not a language is a tool for social promotion, whether or not it signals empowerment (Rabenoro, 1999). They know which language(s) they need to be competent in – namely, those that are used by the major media, and people of high status – and this awareness translates to opinions, right or wrong, about what will be needed for their children to succeed. These are not the kind of attitudes that can be changed at will. Promoting a language requires more than simple inclusion in education as a compulsory subject or LoLT. It must also be used in the media, in writing, in public affairs and in cultural and scientific activities to be endowed with market value and high public regard (Rabenoro, 1999). Obanya (1999) also argues that, although First Language (L1) learning does take place in various African universities (despite the negative attitudes), there is often a problem of ‘enabling policies’ being countered by ‘disabling policies’.

The focus group

A focus group methodology was followed in the study. A mixed group of 15 students was recruited from final-year undergraduates, Honours students and coursework Masters students in the Food Security Programme. The group met for a single session, lasting about one hour, in the second semester of 2009. De Vos (1998) notes that focus groups can be used both in exploration and confirmation of research missions, a format that suited the present study. Adhering to focus group modus operandi, open-ended questions were posed to students in a workshop format to elicit their insight in relation to four explorative themes relating to their general experiences of multilingualism and of mother-tongue instruction at UKZN (Cohen et al., 2007). The four open-ended questions were as follows:
(i) What is your experience of multilingualism at the university?
(ii) Do you believe that multilingualism has a place in higher education?
(iii) Share your views about learning in your mother tongue at university.
(iv) Share your opinion on how multilingualism can be implemented in higher education.

The researchers recorded the focus group discussion, and analysed it in order to identify principal points and themes that emerged from the discussions.

A discussion ensued with responses and comments being shared among the group, and summaries were recorded by the researchers of principal points that emerged in the discussion.

Responses from the focus group

On experience of multilingualism at the university
One student offered a specific comparison between school experience and the absence of equivalent multilingualism at the university:

Processing of information is a challenge. At my school, our teachers used both isiZulu and English in class, we could understand the lessons. Here at university, this is not done. English is the only medium of teaching and learning, and this is a challenge.

This comment plainly articulated the problem a number of the students confirmed: that language constituted a genuine barrier for them; that it was crucial for them as both an instrument of communication and a resource; and that it affected their epistemological access to the content of the subject they were studying. These respondents being exit-level and postgraduate students leads one to question what outcomes their programmes are achieving if the burden of language still continues to weigh this heavily upon them.

An attendant issue here is the element of academic discourse in this experience, since Boughey (2000) reminds us that discourse and language constitute a joint barrier to university student success. Would the kind of experience reported by this student strengthen the case for multilingualism in opening possibilities for better learning to take place – through means, where possible, such as code-switching in the university classroom? Certainly the student participant would seem to concur with Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) that being able to work with two languages would be beneficial.

Coming closer to the issue of academic discourse, but also presenting a somewhat counter-vailing problem, there was some consensus among participants that the concise nature of English terminology, especially where subject content is concerned, presented a challenge when translation to mother tongue was attempted, because few equivalents to the terminology existed in the mother tongue. As one student explained,

We often try to translate to our mother tongue in our small study groups but get bogged down with trying to find equivalents at the expense of meaning and understanding of the concepts.

This comment highlights an obstacle to multilingual teaching which we have already alluded to, namely the academic underdevelopment of African languages per se and their potential levels of discourse and intellectual content.

On whether there is a place for multilingualism in higher education
The focus group had divided opinions about whether they would like to see multilingualism more actively incorporated in their courses.

At one level, participants showed that they were explicitly conscious of the demands placed on them by the need to acquire academic literacy and master academic discourse, with acknowledgement of poor coping with university expectation of critical thinking. One respondent saw relatively favourable potential in the possibility of multilingual learning:

Yes, university education demands students to develop critical thought and creativity which we struggle with due to the language barrier. I can make better arguments in my own language.

But others expressed strong reservations about the multilingual principle in the face of the broad hegemony of English and the social goods it gives access to:
Multilingualism has a place at university, but I would be unhappy to attend mother tongue classes at university should they be available, I came to university to learn English.

Picking up much the same point, a different student pinpointed a shared anxiety:

Where would anyone work if they learnt in their mother tongue?

Implicitly or explicitly, these students indicated awareness that language, as Rabanero (1999) points out, is a tool for social promotion, both an instrument and an expression of power. Once again, the negative attitudes of many African language speakers and their parents (Obanya, 1999) towards these languages explain the complexity of multilingualism. This would seem to indicate that, for attitudes towards multilingualism to improve, African languages have to be demonstrated to be partnering with English and not replacing English in the classroom, enhancing access to social goods and not threatening it, especially in South Africa where the majority of people do not in fact speak English.

On learning in your mother tongue at university

One student dismissed the notion that university learning in the indigenous mother tongue happened at all:

It is non-existent.

Another could see no simple advantage in mother-tongue learning:

It will be complicated and time consuming.

Focus group members gave this notion a fairly summary dismissal: the general opinion was that mother-tongue learning simply didn’t happen at university. And as exit-level and postgraduate students in their particular UKZN Faculty (Science and Agriculture) their testimony is hard to contest. If higher education language policy did indeed support mother-tongue learning then it had not been enforced in their experience.

On how multilingualism can be implemented in higher education

Focus group members were generally sceptical about the prospects for multilingual higher education, and their doubts highlight some fundamental demographic (and indeed systemic) issues for universities in South Africa. One participant pointed to

The lack of good command of the African languages by academics.

Another respondent raised a quite different systemic concern which a South African university must juggle if it is not to compromise one or another constituency of its students:

I am a foreign student, and am concerned about whether I will be excluded from classroom interactions should local language be included as a language of instruction.

Appraisal and conclusions

The debate on multilingualism in higher education classrooms in South Africa is a complex one, and progress in that direction remains slow and patchy – certainly on the evidence from the focus group comments. There may well be longstanding policy in favour of multilingual higher education, but these students had seen little or no evidence of it, and in their university classrooms English continued to hold sway. And while they were consciously burdened by the struggle with language and handicapped by incomplete conceptual understanding even in their own peer-level study groups, they remained adamant that acquiring English was an important goal in being at university, opening crucial doors to employment and other social goods.

Students might have been expected to welcome the prospect of multilingual university classrooms, especially those who had felt the benefit at school level. But all levels of participants in the focus group regarded such a prospect as complicated and time consuming, and this reaction seems to square with Obanya’s (1999) observation that African students show strong resistance to studying in African languages. This negative attitude cannot be dismissed when considering the implementation of multilingualism. The results attest to the fact that in order for multilingualism to become feasible, students must have reason to believe that it holds social capital comparable to that of English.

The other side of the coin, as the students noted, is the question of where academics conversant in the appropriate African languages would come from. Certainly at UKZN, we are not aware if it
has been ascertained how many academics could teach in other languages or use them to complement the English classrooms in the Food Security programme or university-wide (although multilingualism does not necessarily have to take the form of vocal classroom delivery).

It is a reality that African languages are still a long way from being fully developed into academic languages. Yet a multilingual policy in higher education may show dividends in the long run if it is given recognition through sensitivity to student demographics in tutorials and progress in bilingual instruction by means of annotated study materials with explanations in the languages of the class. And while there may be no escaping the inevitable hegemony of English, it is important for African languages, too, to be able to meet intellectual needs that English presently supports. Alexander (2005) argues that the intellectualisation of African languages holds out the possibility of epistemological access to many students who have previously been excluded by their lack of proficiency in the dominant LoLT of academic discourses. This will not happen unless needful work is done. Proponents of multilingualism insist that languages do not develop on their own; they require focused attention (Skutnubb-Kangas, 1995, 1996). Looking further ahead, Skutnabb-Kangas (1995, 1996) draws connections between multilingual versatility and social intelligence, which can enrich the South African identity.

Any implementation of multilingualism at university will require careful planning and appropriate mechanisms. Students will want the reassurance that this will be done alongside English, allowing the system to evolve by providing a well-defined framework in which they can see the possibility of achieving academic literacy and mastering academic discourse.

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