Reflecting on multilingual teaching and learning practices in SA higher education: the case of Rhodes University

Dr Pamela Maseko
School of Languages: African Language Studies
Rhodes University, GRAHAMSTOWN
p.maseko@ru.ac.za

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 Multilingualism is a norm in SA HE

 Undermining the value of multilingualism that embraces African languages means continued disadvantage to black students who have English as an additional language, who although granted access to higher education struggle to succeed and have “a sense of belonging” in HE institutions

 Based on RU experiences, success in implementation of multilingualism should involve African Language Departments, but needs shift in traditional ways of teaching, learning and research in African language scholarship

 A knee-jerk reaction to Afrikaans in HE is not necessarily a solution, but a solution is to reconsider and challenge assumptions about which knowledge matters, and develop new and inclusive ways of dismantling perceptions of reality in HE

 As can be illustrated in RU multilingualism intervention strategies, it is possible but complex, and benefits might not be experienced immediately
Language policy is not about language alone, but also about underlying assumptions which are sociocultural, political, economic, etc. (Alexander 1989, Bamgbose 1991, Heugh 2002,)

In the SA HE context, language policy stipulates transformation in the following areas:

- Multilingualism which embraces indigenous African languages
- Equity of participation by all in acquiring and producing knowledge in HE
- Ensuring of equitable success of all,
- Non-discrimination in access, both physical and epistemic access
- Redress of past political injustices, and
- Social cohesion

Language policy implementation, therefore has to be guided by these ideals

HE language policy legislative framework in SA HE: the ideals
Our language and curriculum policy requires that we respond to issues of linguistic and cultural diversity that is characteristic of our lecture rooms.

- **IsiXhosa mother tongue**
  - Linguistics
  - Literature
  - Sociolinguistics
  - Applied Language Studies (Lexicography, Translation Studies and Language localisation)

- **IsiXhosa in vocation-specific contexts**
  - Pharmacy, Law, Education
  - Journalism (first language and second language)

- **IsiXhosa second language communication skills course (staff)**
- Mother-tongue based bi-/multilingual education embracing African languages

- Development of terminology in certain non-language related disciplines, and piloting use

- Creating texts and knowledge in isiXhosa

- “Unearthing” early isiXhosa texts/knowledge

African languages at Rhodes University: academic literacy and other research
- Creation of awareness about language issues in education, focusing on value of nurturing of linguistic and cultural diversity

- Development of multilingual proficiency for students and staff

- Development of multilingual proficiencies in professional disciplines to prepare students as responsible citizens in a linguistically and culturally diverse SA, and as global citizens

- Promoting academic literacy that recognizes and nurtures linguistic repertoires of students

- Development of African languages for language maintenance
Course description and objectives

This course aims to provide students with linguistic skills and sociolinguistic knowledge essential to practising journalism in a context where more than one language is dominant.

Because of the linguistic composition of the population in our locality, and the language policy of the Province and Rhodes University, the languages used for basis of discussion in lectures and tutorials are isiXhosa and English. However, students are required to reflect on the context of co-existence of these two languages with other languages.

Linguistic skills imparted in the course are communications skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) in isiXhosa. This aspect of the course is designed to accommodate students with widely different proficiency levels in isiXhosa, from those who are fluent to those who have no experience in speaking the language.

Sociolinguistic knowledge provides students with conceptual frameworks that enables them to make sense of the relationship between language and society, the way language is used in different social situations, and the effects of language use on society.

The primary medium of instruction in lectures is English, with key concepts provided in isiXhosa. In tutorials the medium of instruction is English or isiXhosa, depending of how a student groups him/herself.
- Studies in language, culture and society
- Teaching and assessment in isiXhosa
- Primary resources (teaching slides) in isiXhosa – bilingual glossary
- Other resources in English

IsiXhosa mother-tongue: Sociolinguistics
Focus on development of competence “holistically”, i.e. focus on both speaking competence and cultural awareness

Course developed around communication themes, most of which also have cultural issues pertinent to them

All staff, from the executive management to the kitchen staff, participate (academic and non-academic staff)

Course quality-assured and accredited through SAQA

On completion, participants have expressed how the course has assisted them not only in communicating at basic level with their colleagues and students, but also in understanding cultural issues embedded in the language.

IsiXhosa communication skills course: the staff course
Situation at RU CS and Pol Phil Depts – isiXhosa L1 students underachieving and under-represented beyond first year

Focus on Foundation students and Computer Literacy students, through provision of a glossary

CS Glossary consists of 200 common CS terms and Pol Phil 100+ terms (translated and glossed in isiXhosa) - developed in collaboration with Pol Phil lecturer and senior students

Interactive (allows for students to contribute)

Available both online and in print.

Both used in Extended Studies Programmes, and CS in Advanced Certificate in Education

Reported use by speakers of other Nguni languages and English

Improved class participation and pass

Terminology development: Political Philosophy 1 and Computer Literacy course
“It is how the two components of the course (language proficiency and sociolinguistics in the context of media) come together that really makes it worth doing.”

“Learning in context of group-work for the journalism project helped in exchange of knowledge.”

“As an isiXhosa speaker, practicing this kind of journalism was empowering – finding space that values my cultural knowledge and language was the highlight”.

“The lectures on language and power were so informative, they talked to the crux of the matter – we take for granted what happens in the classroom, in dining halls, and in our communication with our sources in terms of language practices.”

I recently wrote a piece for Grocott's Mail on the cultural issues surrounding the building of an Interpretation Centre taking the place of the Makana Initiation School as part of an Egazini Heritage. I'd like to thank you both for all the hard work you put into the isiXhosa for Journalism course last year, as it helped me immensely when writing, researching, and conducting interviews for this story. If I had not taken your course, this story probably would not have been written, so thank you very much.
Many students at Rhodes speak home languages other than English. As a speaker of isiXhosa, I often experience a sense of alienation when encountering the “relentless Englishness” of this university environment. This course is changing that.

Students from linguistic and cultural backgrounds other than that of English are seen to represent an educational ‘problem’. My teachers assume that I need to change in order to be assimilated into the existing culture that values English. Now I know they are a problem...

Now things makes more sense...

I never thought there’s anything to learn in isiXhosa. Now I do not only learn in isiXhosa, but I can use this in Linguistics and Sociology...
- I like the fact that I could use the glossary when I am learning at home, and there is a term I do not understand.

- Using the [metaphors] I know for equivalent terms in English helps me get the things easily.

- Provide a glossary in other languages as well.
The RU Language Policy states that the university needs facilitate appropriate academic literacy in English which is the LoLT.

IsiXhosa and Afrikaans are also recognized as official languages; the university must encourage students and staff to speak an African language as an additional language.

The teaching of, and in isiXhosa, namely scholarship in African languages must be affirmed.

Support in languages other than the LoLT, and the development of indigenous African languages so they are able to meet the demands placed on them must be made a priority.

Promote isiXhosa in controlling domains: Pharmacy, Law, Education, Journalism.

Further to these programmes multilingual support was also provided for developing teaching material for the development of academic literacy, thereby assisting in cognition. There was development of support teaching material for isiXhosa L1 students in Computer Science, Geography and Politics, with Cell Biology to follow.

Role of ALS in classroom, institutional and social transformation.

Lessons learnt: Institutional Language Policy and role of ALS.
The disregard for ALs in Higher Education manifests itself particularly in the throughput of students speaking languages other than English (LOTE) in Higher Education, which is low compared to the number that gains access to HE.

An exploratory study undertaken at Rhodes University in a Cell Biology course tracks students over a three-year period and establishes that there is a 5% margin in the students’ performance, where students speaking LOTE perform, on average, 5% lower than those speaking English, the language of tuition in the institution. So, language HAS an impact on students’ academic performance.

Further, investigations initiated by the DHET report linguistic discrimination experienced by students speaking LOTE (e.g. the 2008 Ministerial Report on Transformation in Higher Education Sector).

Present language practices in HE, which legitimise and overvalue English, are in fact perpetuating social inequalities of the past, rather than enabling social transformation envisaged in the Constitution for South African society.
▪ Multilingualism complex, but necessary

▪ Multilingualism causes discomfort, but discomfort is necessary and should be carefully managed, in case we go back to de facto language policies that encourage monolingualism, values only knowledge derived from the north, and undervalues that which emanates from the south

▪ Classroom teaching methodologies embracing multilingualism needs highly imaginative and bold teachers, and these can emerge from pilot studies from various institutions

▪ Choices made on LoTL, whether by choice or default, based on past experiences, which might not be best for students
Language
- Is a means of communication amongst – encourages understanding and respect of self and others
- It is through language that we make sense of what we know, and through which we connect what we know with what we learn
- It is the repository of knowledge
- In language is embedded the cultural values of the people who speak that language

Given the history of undervaluing of ALs in HE, institutional teaching and learning practices should encourage multilingualism that embraces and values ALs such that students, especially mother tongue speakers, value
- cognitive benefit of learning in one’s primary language,
- the sharing of the languages through acquisition and
- the appreciation of knowledge embedded in their own languages

Inclusive language practices can facilitate transformation of HE in terms of access and success in HE

Why African languages matter in HE: the value of language
Three fundamental principles should inform any multilingual language-in-education policy, and its implementation, and these are:

- mother-tongue instruction for improving quality of education and building on experience of both teachers and students (i.e. learning *in* and *from* the language)

- bilingual or multilingual education at all levels of education for promoting equality and harmony in multilingual societies (reciprocal relationship between languages)

- Linguistic proficiency and intercultural education for understanding between different population groups and respect for human rights (social cohesion)

Bamgbose, A. 1991; Obanya, P. 2004
- An innovative political as well as pedagogical agenda which would target the following action and expected outcomes:

  - Accept the cognitive significance of language choice for Education (especially in knowledge acquisition and transfer)

  - Introduce MT/L1-based multilingual additive models for all educational cycles (and not just for lower primary level) in order to establish and keep in place an adequate and genuine language policy based on the pre-existing multilingual competencies of the students

  - Be conscious to, and sensitive to language and culture of local community and society in curriculum design in order to provide adequate curricula which allow linkages between classroom learning, activities and the out-of-school reality of the students

  - Ensure adequate finances and infrastructure in order to provide adequate AL pedagogical materials both for teaching MT/L1 as subject and potentially use them as LoTL

  - Reorganise and improve teacher training based on relevant sociolinguistic and pedagogical distinctions between foreign and AL competencies, pedagogy and didactics

  - Develop and avail up-to-date technical support in terms of Human Language Technology in order to fully exploit the potentials of e-teaching and learning.

What needs to be done?
ALS curriculum starts from the recognition that South Africa is multilingual and that full participation in such a society demands multilingual proficiency.

Such acknowledgement makes it possible to introduce interventions that challenge the extent to which the university operates as a site of research and learning that promotes the values and interests of privileged sub-sections of society, and silences others.

Interventions enable institutional collaboration for further systematic documentation of processes of implementation of multilingualism in HE.

Multilingualism should embrace ALs, requires re-imagination of scholarship in ALs from scholars in this discipline.

Success of multilingualism in South African university lies on strong research:
- which acknowledges that multilingualism in education in South Africa
- where new hypothesis on learning can emerge
- where theories conceived from other contexts can be reinterpreted, rearticulated and reconceptualised.

Conclusion