

SADC's language tapestry as cultural heritage

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The world of language education is dynamic and constantly evolving. In Southern Africa, a country known for its rich linguistic diversity, the challenges and opportunities in teaching additional and foreign languages are particularly intriguing. On the 8th and 9th of June 2023, a group of language departments from the UFS Faculty of Humanities hosted a symposium that brought together educators, scholars, and experts in the field of language teaching and language acquisition.

In a recent interview, Prof. Angelique van Niekerk of the department Afrikaans & Dutch, German and French at the UFS said that “[t]he symposium was not on multilingualism per se, but as language scholars, we support multilingualism. Social cohesion is affected positively if people and their culture and language are accepted and thus are used.”

This symposium aimed to shed light on the practice of benchmarking and evaluation in language education. Keynote speakers Dr Michelle Joubert and Dr Carina Grobler, both renowned academics in the field, addressed the attendees on benchmarking in foreign language education and the evaluation of foreign language education, respectively.

The two days each started with a keynote address and ended with a group discussion where all colleagues from the different language disciplines shared feedback to the other participants from their individual (language) group breakaway sessions.

Colleagues agreed on the following principles in moving forward across all disciplines represented at the symposium:

The Symposium: A Platform for Collaboration

The symposium created a unique and invaluable opportunity for engagement among educators teaching especially isiZulu and Sesotho as additional and conversational languages from various institutions across Southern Africa. This gathering was a rare occasion that allowed for the forging of partnerships and the exchange of best practices in the realm of language acquisition.

The symposium hosted on the Bloemfontein Campus on 8 and 9 June brought together educators from the UFS, Northwest University, University of Cape Town, University of the Western Cape, University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of Pretoria, Rhodes University, University of South Africa, Stellenbosch University, University of the Witwatersrand, University of Limpopo, Sol Plaatje University, University of Namibia and the National University of Lesotho.

One of the most striking takeaways from the discussions was the pressing need for structured collaborations and the sharing of teaching resources among Southern African universities. Specifically, there were discussions about forming a consortium dedicated to the teaching of African languages as additional languages to speakers of other languages. What makes this initiative particularly intriguing is that colleagues have already started sharing various resources, and the groundwork has been done for establishing a collaborative platform for sharing teaching resources in service of language acquisition practice in Southern-Africa that will be hosted at the UFS.

Foreign Language Departments Unite: Challenges and Aspirations

In the context of foreign language education and language acquisition practice, the symposium brought together the French departments from UFS, NWU, UP, UKZN, and NUL, along with representatives from the German departments at the University of Pretoria and the North-West University. These discussions primarily focused on the differences in student profiles and lecturer-student contact hours across institutions, which vary widely. This diversity makes it challenging for all universities to aspire to the same exit level for their language programs as is practice in the international arena of language competency.

Moreover, questions regarding the applicability of similar (international) frameworks such as the Common European Framework for Language Referencing in a university context of Southern Africa were addressed. Many colleagues expressed the view that university language classes should extend beyond mere language acquisition. This sentiment ignited a discussion on the necessity to review both the language and literature curricula in foreign language programmes in Southern Africa. Unanimously, the colleagues agreed on the need for further dialogues fuelled by the group sharing of resources and best (teaching) practices that will also support (horizontal and vertical) mobility of SA students and external examination and moderation practice amongst colleagues in Southern Africa.

Afrikaans and Dutch: Collaboration and Challenges

Within the Afrikaans language group, delegates from seven universities attended the symposium, with one representative traveling all the way from the University of Namibia. The symposium yielded several positive outcomes, including the identification of resources that could be shared among universities. Participants also discussed aligning outcomes for beginner's foreign language acquisition courses to ensure uniformity across Southern African universities. Marking and assessing various tasks were other focal points, and while there were varying opinions on assessment methods, there was much food for thought concerning approaches to assessments.

Challenges in this realm included class sizes, available teaching hours, and addressing student motivation. Nevertheless, the event was deemed informative, and it provided an excellent platform for networking among educators in the same field.

South African Sign Language: Fostering Inclusivity and Collaboration

In a remarkable development, the symposium also saw the participation of South African Sign Language (SASL) representatives from four universities: UFS, University of Stellenbosch, Northwest University, and Sol Plaatje University.

As this was the inaugural symposium of its kind, it provided an exceptional opportunity for lecturers to share insights about how they teach SASL modules at different universities. Notably, the lecturers from Sol Plaatje and Northwest University, who are relatively young and less experienced, gained a wealth of knowledge and insight from their more seasoned counterparts. This knowledge exchange centred around the challenges and strategies for teaching SASL as a foreign language.

It was unanimously agreed that sharing module information among universities would promote greater uniformity in SASL education across institutions. Additionally, discussions revolved around the assessment of SASL. Participants shared insights into the complexities of assessing cognitive levels in SASL acquisition tests, highlighting the need for further research in this area to ensure that assessments account for questions on all cognitive levels.

Keynote Addresses: Benchmarking and Evaluation

The symposium was delighted by the presence of two distinguished keynote speakers who addressed crucial aspects of foreign language education. Dr Michelle Joubert from the Centre for Teaching and learning at the University of the Free State delved into the topic of benchmarking in foreign language education. She emphasised the significance of establishing standardised benchmarks and performance indicators in language education.

Dr Carina Grobler, a lecturer in French language acquisition and representing the North-West University, explored the pivotal theme of evaluation in foreign language education. Dr Grobler emphasised the need for comprehensive evaluation strategies that encompass not only language proficiency but also cultural awareness and communication skills in the socio-economic diverse zone.

Moving forward:

Based on the debriefing discussions amongst the UFS colleagues in July 2023, the dept. Afrikaans and Dutch, German and French, who initiated the (apparent) first symposium of this kind in Southern Africa are busy with piloting a platform and a collaborative

structure to ensure that we can keep the momentum of the symposium. Detail on the pilot project (platform and collaborative structure) will be shared as wide as possible, starting with all participants in the symposium involved in teaching language acquisition in Sotho, Zulu, Afrikaans, Dutch, German, French and Sign Language.

Colleagues are looking forward to the invitation from one of the participating institutions in June 2023 for the next symposium invite in 2024.

Conclusion: A Catalyst for Advancement

The Language Teaching Symposium at the University of the Free State on the 8th and 9th of June 2023, emerged as a catalyst for positive change in the landscape of language education in South Africa. It facilitated collaboration, resource sharing, and critical discussions among educators from various language departments. The symposium underscored the need for standardized benchmarks, comprehensive evaluation strategies, and the integration of culture and communication in language education.

As Southern Africa continues to embrace its linguistic diversity, initiatives like this symposium will play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of language education and promoting multilingualism, also in regard of languages beyond the borders of the region. The commitment of academics to working together and sharing best practices bodes well for the future of language learners in Southern Africa, fostering a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of languages that make up the **SADC's cultural heritage**. The inclusion of South African Sign Language in this symposium marked a significant step towards inclusivity and collaboration in language education, setting a precedent for future engagements in this domain.

A vote of thanks goes out to the University of the Free State's organising committee and especially the two people involved in the practical arrangements, Isabel Mostert (French section) and Lize Botha (German section). The academic staff members of the following departments were involved in organizing the event: African Languages; Afrikaans & Dutch; German & French; South African Sign Language), the dean, prof Mogomme Masoga of the faculty of the Humanities, UFS, the Centre for Teaching and Learning

(CTL) at the UFS. We also thank the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic, Dr Engela van Staden for her support in making this symposium a reality.

Photo:



Language teaching professionals from Southern Africa attended a two-day symposium on foreign language acquisition practice on the UFS Bloemfontein Campus.
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