Assessing Students' Perceptions of Conversational IsiZulu as a Compulsory Module in a South African University

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ABSTRACT This study was conducted to gauge students' perceptions of conversational IsiZulu in a South African university. Driven by the bilingual policy initiatives of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), a total of 1 287 students have registered for conversational IsiZulu as a mandatory requirement for completing an undergraduate degree. This study is an investigation in which interviews, observation and policy documents were used to gather data from students who are taking the module for the first time. Using a qualitative case study, this study investigates the learning of Conversational IsiZulu, paying attention to the classroom social context, meanings and experiences of participants. Research findings suggest that students responded positively to learning an additional language, despite challenges experienced in the mastery of content and vocabulary amongst other aspects. This study therefore concludes that the UKZN Language Policy of eventual bilingual education is successful within the School of Education in its initial stages of implementation.

INTRODUCTION

During my visit to Europe I visited a small East European country called Lithuania. Lithuania is 36 times smaller in size than Congo (DRC); and 14 times smaller than Nigeria. The population is only three million, 60 times smaller than the Nigerian population; and only 7 percent of the Lagos population. They speak, write and teach in their own Lithuanian language, from primary school to university education. Over 2000 medical doctors are trained every year at their universities, in their Lithuanian language. Satellites have been built and host some of the world leading laser research and development centres. It is also a strong food and information technology industry country. Any major book in the world is translated in less than three months into the national language. Their libraries and bookstores are exclusively in Lithuanian. In spite of the globalisation process, the national language has not been abandoned. The highly-respected Lithuanian language academy domesticates all alien words before they would go main-stream. This is contrary to the Africans who had their own indigenous knowledge systems and practices before colonization the school curriculum still remains Eurocentric in nature.

In South Africa, we live in an age of linguistic diversity increased by globalization, the movement of people and cultures. The social context of language learning and teaching is greatly impacted by a nation's political decision to give special status to a particular language or languages. This status can be achieved either by making the language an ofûcial language of the country or by giving special priority to the language by requiring its study as a foreign language. Today there are many countries in which English has been and continues to be an ofûcial language. Two cases in point are Nigeria and South Africa. The focus of this discussion is on isiZulu, a language that was sidelined during the apartheid era.

Historically, IsiZulu, together with other African indigenous languages has been marginalized and given little credence as a language of scholarship and learning. This was largely due to the apartheid policies of the time, which sought to keep black communities in a perpetual state of underdevelopment. In a broader linguistic context, this paper will try to give an appraisal of the evolving status of isiZulu and how it can claim legitimacy as a compulsory language for teaching and learning at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This study therefore sets out to assess students' reception of conversational isiZulu as a compulsory module in a university. The South African constitution's language policy recommends the use of an indigenous language as the language of learning where possible. Although much needs to be done in the development of language registers and lexicons for academic purposes, one must start the process to initiate such scholarship and language development.

The case at hand is centred on the University in KwaZulu-Natal located in the province of

KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Almost 80 per cent of the population speaks IsiZulu as a first language. It is one of the few tertiary institutions in the country where tangible steps have been taken toward incorporating an African language for academic purposes. Through this policy isiZulu has been introduced as a compulsory subject for all undergraduate students starting from 2014. The aim is to develop IsiZulu as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT). Against this background it seems appropriate to investigate University of KwaZulu-Natal students' perceptions of conversational isiZulu as a compulsory module in a South African university.

The Council on Higher Education is of the view that the first phase of this policy which focuses on language competency is important given the multicultural and multilingual nature of South Africa. Similarly, the development of conceptual terminology and glossaries is to be welcome as it would enable isiZulu home-language speakers to effectively engage in academic and intellectual discourses. Elsewhere, the Inter-institutional Centre for Languages Development and Assessment (ICELDA), a partnership of four multilingual universities – Pretoria, Stellenbosch, North West and Free State encourage the nurturing and development of indigenous languages for teaching and learning. ICELDA designs language tests, and supports research in language testing. It is the outcome of collaboration, since 2004, among the partnering universities. This institution is a driving force in the use of indigenous languages in teaching and learning.

According to the UKZN's Language policy, in phase 1 of the programme –from 2014 to 2018, students and staff would develop 'communicative competence" in isiZulu and English sufficient for academic interaction. Phase 2 – from 2019 to 2029 – would encourage and facilitate all academic disciplines to assist students and staff to develop writing skills in isiZulu, making each programme to determine the appropriate level and type of proficiency. This is in line with the university's language policy as articulated in the UKZN transformation charter, which seeks to develop African languages as academic languages.

Multilingualism in South Africa

South Africa has been a meeting ground for speakers of several languages, but the focus of this research is IsiZulu. IsiZulu is a Bantu language that belongs to the Nguni language cluster derived from the Niger – Kordofanian family. Until South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, the only two languages used for instruction in the tertiary educational sphere were English and Afrikaans. Since 1996, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA 1996) extended official status to nine African indigenous languages, recognizing the multilingual character of South African society.

The Language Policy in Education (section 29, 2 of the Constitution (RSA 1996) provides for all South Africans, 'the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably "practicable"'. Since 2002, a language policy framework by the Department of Education (DoE) has aimed specifically to enhance linguistic equity and access in higher education institutions. The document states that 'the development, in the medium to long-term, of South African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education, alongside English and Afrikaans'. Thus, the South African government has taken recognition of the 'undisputable fact' that African indigenous languages ought to be developed as languages of learning and teaching (LoLTs) in all educational institutions in order to empower African people (Wolff 2003).

The research questions this study tends to engage with are:
1. What attitude do the students have towards the introduction of conversational IsiZulu as a compulsory module in UKZN?
2. Why do they have these particular attitudes?
3. What do students perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of the conversational IsiZulu module?
4. Why do students perceive the strengths and weaknesses the way they do?

Significance of the Study

The study is based on my personal experience and issues concerning the lack of research in indigenous language policy implementation and the need to unpack the way students perceive the fact that it is now compulsory to learn Conversational IsiZulu, a language that was previously considered being inadequate for aca-

demic purposes. Naturally, one expects criticism from many students because change is something that is rejected from the onset, especially if it has to do with language. This study evokes some nostalgic feelings in me too having come from a background where my mother tongue did not enjoy the same status largely due to policy issues. But it can be empowering to see a language of the majority in the society dominated by English take a center stage in language learning. This study can provide a platform for students' voice to be heard on the issue making Conversational isiZulu a compulsory module in the university.

The reason this study is relevant is because it affects a crucial part of South African educational history. The study looks into the key developmental issues that South African higher education has been preoccupied with during the past twenty years. They are a combination of transformation efforts by the new government and responses to international trends in higher education. Universally, higher education systems are under pressure to be socially responsive to changes in society by addressing concerns such as equity, access, success, and production.

The rationale behind this decision to introduce a compulsory African indigenous language is explained thus: "Multilingualism is an important tool for social cohesion, and for individual and social development. Community life takes place mainly in African languages. Students would benefit by being able to communicate in an African language and also being able to access learning through an African language". Being multilingual is of great value for all citizens living in South Africa. This definition shows how important indigenous languages have become in this dispensation.

Theoretical Framework

This study emerged from Cummins' concepts of the second language acquisition theories. One of the expectations and assumption of bilingual education is that the product becomes successful both linguistically and culturally, but it is only possible when the form of bilingualism is additive rather than subtractive (Hornby 1977; Genesee 1977). Subtractive bilingualism arises out of a situation where the second language is acquired without accommodating the linguistic skills that have already been developed in the

first language (Mwamwenda 1996). Such situations are evident in societies where one language is considered as having a more prestigious socio-economically determined status than the other, which is regarded as inferior (Hornby 1977; Jeffreys 1996; Roy-Campbell 1996).

METHODOLOGY

The paper follows a case study approach – thus a case study design was used to unpack the students' reception of conversational isiZulu as a compulsory module in the university. The design was appropriate for this project, to obtain rich description of students view on the module. The primary aim of this study was to assess the reception of conversational IsiZulu as a compulsory module in a university, especially in the sense that most of the participants are non – native speakers of the language. Qualitative research method was used in this paper to generate, record and analyze the data.

Using a qualitative approach enabled the researcher to explore the experiences of students through a series of closed-ended, and open-ended qualitative questions. The data analysis and report of findings proved beneficial in the process of validating the overall research study being performed by the researcher. Data were generated by means of classroom observation of students in the conversational isiZulu classes, and through semi-structured interview of students. The researcher purposefully selected ten (10) Indian students registered for this module because they are learning isiZulu as a second language and the researcher is focussed on conversational IsiZulu second language students.

The ethical clearance was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Ethics Committee. Signed consent forms were obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity was consistently ensured and pseudonyms were given. Participants were kept informed of every step of the process they were involved in. Informed consent was obtained. Participants were informed that they could withdraw whenever they wish to. The researcher attempted to answer the research questions through the review of the literature, and by conducting 10 interviews with undergraduate students involved in the learning the module in the university.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Democracy: Legitimization of African Indigenous Languages

Prior to the democratization of South Africa twenty years ago, there was no use of IsiZulu as a language of teaching and learning in any South African University. Some of the shortcomings of the teaching of any African language in South Africa have been the failure to relate the language to its historical or social context.

Since the implementation of the language policy, it appears that not much progress has been made in implementing it, especially with respect to the use of mother tongue in education. The language – in- education policy (LiEP) promotes multilingualism and equal importance is placed on all the eleven official languages in our country.

UKZN became one of the first tertiary institutions to introduce isiZulu as a language of learning in particular programmes in health science and education. In 2013, it was recognized as achieving among the highest number of research output. Similarly, Rhodes University and the University of Cape Town have made isiXhosa compulsory for students in some programmes (for example journalism). Various claims that such policy and curriculum choices would damage the universities and results in untoward consequences for students and staff proved to be false. Many scholars have extensively contributed to the issue of promoting African indigenous languages such as isiZulu to being the language of teaching and learning. One of them is Robert Balfour whose contribution deals with the conditions for effective language policy development and implementation in institution of higher education, in particular with reference to the development of academically marginalized languages.

On the basis of this growing demand and linguistic reality, UKZN this year implemented a compulsory IsiZulu course for first-year students. Students are required to demonstrate bilingualism to earn their degrees. This was a first for South Africa, and it attracted criticism from both students and academics. Under apartheid and the implementation of Bantu education, rigid school segregation denied black students' access to speakers of English, except in the few remaining mission schools (Mesthrie et al. 2011). English was the dominant lingua franca in the apartheid regime, with democracy; all 11 South African indigenous languages are deemed suitable for communication and official recognition. Demographically, IsiZulu is the dominant language in the Kwa Zulu- Natal province. 80 percent of the people in this province has isiZulu as their first language (Maartens 2008).

Therefore, one can say that 2014 is a watershed year in the linguistic status of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This is because Conversational isiZulu was introduced as a compulsory module for undergraduate degrees. It meant that the language most spoken in the province was at last given official recognition and status. This is in line with South African Constitution's intention to promote and value indigenous languages in higher education. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 recognizes all eleven official languages as equal.

As earlier mentioned, the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal (UKZN) has announced that isiZulu would, from 2014 be a compulsory subject for undergraduate students. Needless to say, scholars have interpreted this development differently. From one perspective, language policies promoting the indigenous African languages in tertiary education support what Alexander (2001) calls the 'democratic responsibility of the post-apartheid university'. From the other perspective, however, this language policy is perceived to revert to apartheid-style Bantu education practices and as fostering ethnic identities and tribalism rather than supporting a development of a broader and more inclusive South African identity.

According to the University Language policy, in phase 1 of the programme –from 2014 to 2018, students and staff would develop 'communicative competence' in isiZulu and English sufficient for academic interaction. Phase 2 – from 2019 to 2029 – would encourage and facilitate all academic disciplines to assist students and staff to develop writing skills in isiZulu, making each programme to determine the appropriate level and type of proficiency. This is in line with the university's language policy and plan and the UKZN transformation charter, which seeks to develop African languages as academic languages.

The university has an obligation to ensure that linguistic choices result in effective learning solution as 60 percent of students are isiZulu speakers. Although universities are autonomous, there is an on-going debate on language

choices. Some feel it should not be imposed on students. This is an accepted practice of a democratic dispensation where human rights and language choices are respected. Phase 1 is steps to address the problem were students are regularly examined in languages other than those in which they are taught, and in which they generally have low proficiency.

The UKZN language policy aims to respond to the historical legacies of its two ancestor universities (University of Natal and Durban-Westville University), and to give further substance to the vision of the university to be the premier university of African scholarship (Balfour 2006). It attempts to describe how English and isiZulu might come to be further developed and utilized by the university to the benefit of all constituencies of the universities. This means that it is not only the language discipline of the university that benefit from this project but all the disciplines in the university because language is one issues that is linked to all issues. There is no one that does not make use of language whether you are a nurse or a doctor you will need language to communicate to your patients and if it happen that you are fluent in isiZulu and you may be white or from Indian origin, it means that it will further help you to reach to larger segments of the society who may not have English proficiency.

Nevertheless, South Africa is one of the few countries in the world, and only one in Africa, which has seen, during the twentieth century, the development of a language from one which has no governmental recognition, and existed largely in spoken form, to one in which substantial parts of the government, the economy, and higher education were run. South Africa set off on another unique linguistic journey. This time, in 1994, the country became the location of an effort to develop, simultaneously, nine indigenous African languages, granting all nine along with English and Afrikaans, equal status.

The findings in the literatures on language acquisition reveal that there are still some gaps which this study addresses the new language policy shift in the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This means that if taken seriously, this language policy shift can contribute immensely in building a balanced society and a prosperous South Africa. This will surely help those who neglect indigenous language learning for fear that the first language negatively interferes with the learning of a second language.

The issues raised in the literatures as used in the language policy reflects conflicting ideologies emanating from the history of this country and illuminates the politics that led to the formation of a democratic state in South Africa where equality reigns. Subsequently, Ethnicity and group demands have had a significant role in language discussions that led to the formation of the current language policy. According to literature, when planning to introduce a new language policy especially in the higher learning, status planning should be complemented with corpus planning to ensure that languages are properly developed.

It was surprising that the facts emanating from the data show an overwhelming acceptance of this module by the students who were interviewed. All the students interviewed agreed that it was enjoyable and interesting to learn the module. They felt it was the right decision the University made in making IsiZulu compulsory. This is so because it is so important for them to speak the language spoken by majority of South Africans since they will end up becoming teachers in the classrooms and this will definitely come into play to help them in teaching learners who may not be able to understand English language.

One of the students says: *I don't think so because after all it is a language that you are speaking and two periods a week is not enough to learn a complete language.* This was when they were asked if enough time was allocated for the class. Some say that more lecturers should be employed to cater for all students.

Although some of the students interviewed complained about the small classrooms, they also complained that there were inadequate campaigns about the introduction in the campus. Some even said that there are too many students in one class, so they suggested that smaller groups can be created in order to allow them see one on one with their lecturers.

A student pointed out that: Yes, as I said it will help you to adapt yourself in a different situation, as a teacher you go into a classroom, you won't get everybody speaking the same language or they won't be able to understand us effectively. So I think if you have basic understanding of an additional language you will be able to be better, more flexible and will be able to teach better.

Another student suggested that he wish they were asked to do this from the primary school.

This statement can be linked to the theoretical framework that hence, mother tongue education in the primary years offers the best introduction to literacy that eventually becomes useful in the acquisition of a second language (Hakuta 1986; Hawes 1979; Travers et al. 1993; Mwamwenda 1996).

Students were cognizant of the dominance of English and were aware of how English influences their lives both at school, at home as well as socially. These findings present a challenge in that they show how students have come to view the boundaries created by the dominance of English as natural. The findings indicate that some students view the dominance of English as normal hence isiZulu is not perceived as normal because it will not "open opportunities globally".

Students' perception towards learning in the English medium varies in relation to their beliefs, wants and needs. Most, if not all students attitudes are an indication of what society propagates. According to Van der Walt (2004), the international and economic prestige given to the English language is what encourages students as well as their parents to portray a positive attitude towards learning in the English medium. Van der Walt (2004) goes on to explain that this is not a phenomena that is restricted to South Africa, but it is instead a growing global trend. In the article written by Van der Walt (2004), he explains that the reason for the students' positive attitudes towards learning in the English medium stems directly from their strong belief that English is the direct link to employment, as well as global communication. In the light of the above revelation in these literatures, it has become obvious that this language policy that allow for isiZulu to become a compulsory module will be received by non-isiZulu speaking students alike because of the numerous arguments that have been put by so many author in support of an indigenous language to be used in the tertiary level of education.

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Nevertheless, a crucial issue that has been addressed with the introduction of isiZulu is that it will open windows of opportunity as an answer to numerous challenges faced by several indigenous languages which has been marginalized in Africa. This policy has the capacity will position IsiZulu to become known globally through its use at the university level. It is obvious that Africa languages is in dire need for reforms and UKZN has taken the bull by the horn as an African Premier University of African scholarship coupled with the platform laid by the country's constitution unlike what is obtainable in so many African nations. I think this should go beyond rhetoric to include detailed implementation strategies and resources for its development and learning in the University.

CONCLUSION

The study assessed students' perception of the introduction of conversational isiZulu as a compulsory module in UKZN. It can be said that the learning of conversational isiZulu is effective and successful according to the participants because of the support giving to the participants in the university. For the purpose of the study, I was interested in finding out what were the ten focal students' perceptions of being taught in and assessed in IsiZulu. It is also important to ponder what we can learn from their perceptions. In addition, I sought to understand the impact of the home language and language policy implication of the university on the ten focal students, and also establish if there were any tensions between the policy and the second language they are learning at school, and most importantly, the meanings of the tensions for the students' language learning at school. Throughout the study, I tried to show how the socio-political and cultural factors and the university language policy shaped the students' learning of the new language in the university.

The study found that the participants wanted the integration of indigenous languages to take place at the school; however they indicated that for the integration to be effective changes in policy, curriculum and the school environment had to change. The study found that the

participants felt that the language policy was not fully meeting their needs because though isiZulu was a subject at the school, it was however not promoted. The study found that the policy to a certain degree did not adhere to the principles as stated in the Constitution that:

Indigenous languages *'shall be the official South African languages at national level, and conditions shall be created for their development and promotion of their equal use and enjoyment.'*

The study found that African indigenous languages were not equally used and promoted at the school. In South Africa, the history is riddled with issues of power, prejudice, discrimination, marginalization and subordination. In order to build a better South Africa, the past inequalities must be addressed and effectively dealt with. In dealing with the past therefore, there is a need for the education system to effectively deal with past issues in order to make way for the integration of indigenous languages in South African schools.

Throughout this research, I was guided by Cummins second language acquisition theories. Using data collected from the participants at the university, I found that while the home context limited the development of students' bilingualism, the university context offered a better context for the students to enhance their bilingual skills. At the home, the students were exposed to limited texts and limited opportunities to engage with the texts and use their languages in meaningful ways. On the other hand, the students' lecture rooms seemed to provide the students with diverse texts that encouraged them to use languages in flexible ways as they made sense of the language learning. These findings raise questions about what lecturers and researchers can do in order to ensure that bilingual students in South Africa and in similar contexts receive literacy instruction that addresses their needs and sustains bi/multilingualism in these contexts.

I would argue after going through the data made available to me through interview and observation that there is a high degree of acceptance by students who are learning conversation IsiZulu at Edgewood campus of University of KwaZulu-Natal irrespective of their culture, ethnicity and identity. In short, the majority of respondents in this study indicated that they favored learning conversational isiZulu as a compulsory module in the university.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After reflecting on my findings, I offer the following recommendations: (i) Students noted that there is not much done at the school to promote isiZulu. It is therefore recommended that the school establish isiZulu committees that will be responsible for establishing programs that will promote the use of isiZulu and indigenous knowledge at the school. The school can do this by having open communication with the students and the parents in order to establish what the needs are and try to accommodate these needs in the established isiZulu programs; (ii) Students raised concerns about the time allocated for the teaching of Conversational isiZulu and the classrooms not accommodating enough. It is recommended that the Conversational isiZulu timetable be revised by school timetable boards at the school and changes be made to prioritise the time allocated for the teaching of Conversational isiZulu; (iii) The use of isiZulu at the school should not only be confined to the classroom but students should be offered an opportunity to speak isiZulu as this can also give students of different races an opportunity to learn the language and culture as well. It is recommended that schools should consider the impact that their policies have on the students' impression about language. It is also recommended that the school should be more sensitive towards the matters relating to language; (iv) There was a strong sense from the students that isiZulu is not given any value in society. Students noted that isiZulu is not viewed as a language that can offer one better employment opportunities. It is recommended isiZulu must be made as a requirement in the job market, this way educational institutions will ensure that isiZulu gets space and adequate time in the curriculum.

These findings support Bourdieu's argument that languages are valued or devalued according to the power vested in their users. It is recommended therefore that, for the language of isiZulu to be accepted, it has to be seen as an appropriate language that has value by those in power.

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