Correlation between Student Performance and Medium of Instruction: A Self-reflexive Perspective

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Abstract

Twenty years into democracy and commensurate with rectifying disparities of the past regime in South Africa, where African languages were marginalized, the buzz word, transformation, resonates in most discourses. Likewise, in an effort to conform to such adaptations most institutions of higher learning are re-aligning themselves with what the constitution of the country promulgates with regards promotion of indigenous languages. In this sense transformation implies, amongst other things, that the previously disregarded indigenous languages are afforded equal status with English and Afrikaans which were dominant languages during the Apartheid epoch. In essence, therefore, and informed by the country's constitution in which the Bill of Rights is entrenched, this means that students have a right to also receive education in the official language (s) of their choice; in the context of this paper, isiZulu. This is critical especially when conveying unfamiliar concepts which, because of their nature, are difficult to grasp for students to whom English is a second language; hence an emphasis on institutions of higher learning deliberating on issues of language policy and its implementation. Against this background, this article reflects and reports on my personal experience on the impact of applying different language modes of teaching a third year undergraduate and first semester module called Isintu Linguistics, Heritage and Introduction to Research[1] to three cohorts at the

[1] The module has three components each of which is taught by different lecturers. I am particularly interested in the last component, namely, Introduction to Research which I teach.

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University of Zululand from 2012 to 2014. The transition from teaching the module purely in English to enhancing it with isiZulu and the results achieved confirmed that there is correlation between students' performance and the medium through which the teaching and learning take place.

Keywords: African languages, Apartheid epoch, institutions of higher learning, medium of instruction, transformation, unfamiliar concepts

Nompumelelo Zondi *Ukuxhumana Phakathi Kokusebenza Kwabafundi kanye Nolimi Lokufundisa: Kubukwa ngeso Lombhali*

Isifingqo

Sekuyisikhathi esingangeminyaka engamashumi amabili iNingizimu Afrika yathola inkululeko kwingcindezi ebikhona ngesikhathi sobandlululo. Lokho kuchaza ukuthi sekunobulungiswa endleleni okubhekelelwa ngayo zonke izinhlanga ezakhele uMzansi Afrika. Yingakho nje igama elithi 'izinguquko' sekuhlangatshezwana nalo yonke indawo. Ngokunjalo nasezikhungweni zemfundo ephakeme lezi zinguquko kubhekeke ukuba zingagcini nje ngokwaziwa ukuthi zikhona kodwa kuqinisekiswe ukuthi ziyalandelwa ngokuhambisana nalokho okushiwo kumthethosisisekelo wezwe. Phakathi-ke kwalezi zinguquko kukhona nalezo ezithinta ukusetshenziswa kwezilimi zomdabu ngendlela efanayo naleyo obekusetshenziswa ngayo ulimi lwesiNgisi nolwesiBhunu nobekuyizilimi ebezihlonishwa ngendlela ekhethekile ngesikhathi esingaphambili. Futhi ngokwenqgikithi yokwakheka koMthetho ogunyaza amalungelo noshicilelwe abafundi sekuyilungelo labo ukuba bathole igunya lokusebenzisa izilimi zabo ezisemthethweni ngokwentando yabo. Kuleli phepha lolo limi engikhuluma ngalo yisiZulu. Lokhu kubaluleke ngendlela eyisimangaliso ikakhulu uma kubhekiswe ezifundweni ezisebenzisa amatemu angajwayelekile nokunzima ukuwaqonda uma abafundi befundiswa ngesiNgisi kuphela nokuwulimi okungelona olwabo. Phela ngokwemvelo kunobunzima ukuqwala nokuchwephesha imibonongqangi engelona eyolimi lwakho. Kungalesi sizathu ukuba izikhungo zemfundo ephakeme zinesibophezelo nemigomo yokuba zikumele ukuthuthukiswa kwezilimi zomdabu.

Introduction

In a book entitled *Can Schools Save Indigenous Languages* edited by Hornberger (2008), contributors touch on a rather precarious issue of the potential extinction of indigenous languages if they are not revived. They appeal to linguists and scholars to consider these languages and caution against their neglect as this could have catastrophic consequences. As an introduction to my article which reflects on the significance of including mother tongue in imparting knowledge to students especially when dealing with complex courses, I find the following words of a Grade 8 and 9 English and Geography teacher from Bwasana Basic School in Zambia appropriate:

> As much as we need to teach in English, we have also to understand that these pupils have their first language, which is chiTonga. So most of the time when we are teaching, they would want to participate well. When you use their own language, that's why in most cases we have to integrate. The Minister will say, 'No, in the upper grades, you have to use English throughout', but we are also concerned with the pupils participating, they have to participate in their own way. And they learn well when they participate. So we are forced, actually we have to use their language at some point to explain the contents well. We find our own way, though our books are printed in English, meaning that we have to teach in English. But the people we are facilitating to, they don't understand English well. So where we feel that we have to use chiTonga we have to make them understand better (Clemensen 2010:35).

Whilst the quotation above refers to teachers involved in the Zambian high school education system, the medium of instruction which is a point of departure in the concerns raised in the extract, is in some way similar to the case I am making in this article, hence its contextual validity. The excerpt surmises that an implementation of selected Zambian languages in early education would be beneficial to students in later years. Teachers find themselves in an awkward position when Education authorities prescribe for them how to run their classes without understanding their actual day-to-day class experiences. In the context of my paper I argue that due to my students' struggling with comprehending contents of a complex nature in a second

language which my research module was presenting, I did a self-reflexive evaluation of my teaching approach and came up with counteractive strategies to address the problem. Like the teachers in the excerpt above, I also found it appropriate to use other methods which were deemed essential in accommodating student needs; a resolution that is a motivation behind the conception of this article.

Language policy studies are of universal concern especially in post-colonial countries; hence universities engaging in round tables which involve stakeholders exchanging ideas on this significant matter. At a global level, for example, the three day 2nd International Colloquium on 'Multilingualism from Below' held at the University of Antwerp, Netherlands, in September 2009, offered a new view on the construction of multilingualism from below as a reference point for contributors (Cuvelier 2010). Critiquing state organizations for imposing laws on language policies without involving users of the language, the premise upon which that particular symposium was founded, was that it was time that state organs moved away from regarding those who 'live' the language as passive recipients of promulgations that they design and then impose from above (Cuvelier 2010: xii).

South Africa is no exception in the context of the preceding argument where in the twentieth year of its democracy it is still struggling with issues of redressing irregularities of the past; one such anomaly being a question of which language to use as a medium of instruction especially where most students belong to previously disadvantaged language groups. The term 'rainbow nation' underscores the essence of diversity which is characteristic of South African society. It follows therefore, that South Africa's policy of multilingualism which accommodates the linguistic needs of everyone who regards South Africa as their home, should be recognized. Furthermore, within the framework of multilingualism the Department of Higher Education Act of 1997 sheds light on policy for higher education. It requires that all institutions of higher education should deliberate on the language policy of their institution whose implementation will be monitored and evaluated by the organs tasked with this responsibility. In this regard, the documents, Language in Education Policy and the Language Policy for Higher Education shed light on the background for language policy development (Mesthrie 2002).

In celebration of the 20th anniversary of the democratic dispensation numerous events commemorating a stalwart, Nelson Mandela and those who

contributed to the democracy and freedom of South Africa are being held nationwide. In institutions of higher learning this opportunity is also being seized to hold colloquiums which push the academic agenda of transformation, amongst other things. An example at hand is that of the recent Colloquium that was organized by the College of Humanities of the University of KwaZulu-Natal which took place in November 2013 (Ndimande-Hlongwa *et. al.* 2014 Call for Papers Document). The symposium focused on African languages and cut across several sub-themes in as far as the role they (should) play in post-apartheid South Africa. Amongst the issues discussed were race and gender equality, the justice system, freedom of expression, access to information and the right to education (ibid). Dialogues of this nature usually result in publications that disseminate informed individual contributions that have been brainstormed and discussed during the proceedings and which, after refinement may become available for public consumption in the form of publications; hence this current issue of Alternation.

The account above serves as a means of contextualizing the issue under examination in this article where, using a theory of self-reflexivity, I reflect on my teaching methods and how the exercise improved student performance. The growth in the pass rate in my research component of a module called, *Isintu Linguistics, Heritage and Introduction to Research* confirmed that students' performance is related to the language medium in which knowledge is imparted. Even though the discussion is confined to different student cohorts in three consecutive years (first semester), I firmly believe that the findings contribute to a broad discourse of promotion of Indigenous African languages.

Background Information

Twenty years into hard earned democracy South Africa's indigenous languages continue to be subservient to English and Afrikaans. This outrageous reality is attested to by, amongst other cases, an incident which took place a few years ago when the then Chief Executive Officer of the Pan South African Language Board (Pansalb), Ntombenhle Nkosi took one of the top schools in the country to the Equality Court (Turner 2010). Her main complaint was that the particular school's language policy was promoting

subjugation of indigenous languages as children were being taught what is derogatory known as 'Kitchen Zulu'. This criticism emerged when Nkosi discovered that all Grades 10-12 pupils in this prestigious school (regardless of their ethnic backgrounds) were expected to study English as a first language and had an option of studying Afrikaans or isiZulu as a second language in a province where isiZulu is a mother tongue for most of the population (Mesthrie 2002).

South Africa's new constitution of 1996 recognizes eleven languages which include Afrikaans and English; previously official languages in the apartheid era. Thus over and above these languages, the indigenous African languages of the Republic of South Africa, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu were declared official (ibid.). In each of the nine provinces constituting South Africa the dominant language reflects the majority of the ethnic group found in that province. It follows then that while there are different racial groups in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, more than 77.8% of the total population of KwaZulu-Natal speak isiZulu as their first language (The languages of South Africa, 6 November 2012). By extension, isiZulu people are 'the largest ethnic group in South Africa' (Ethnologue 2009). Essentially, therefore, in the new dispensation it is appropriate for isiZulu that it be promoted in such a way that even speakers of other languages are encouraged to learn it, even if only its basics. The exercise might be worthwhile as it may result in understanding of the thought pattern of owners of the language while further improving social barriers that are likely to happen as a result of prejudices that take place when in-group members interact with out-group members (Stephan *et.al.* 2000).

Contextual Background of the University of Zululand

The following information is consciously offered as a way of contextualizing the present article. I joined the University of Zululand (Unizulu) in the beginning of 2012 bringing seventeen years of academic experience and expertise from one of the former traditional English universities in the country. Unizulu is a rural based comprehensive university catering for students mostly from formerly disadvantaged backgrounds. During apartheid era the language policy for the University of Zululand was Afrikaans, English

and isiZulu. However, as was the case in other universities nationwide where English (and sometimes Afrikaans) was a *lingua franca*, Unizulu used English as a medium of instruction. Prah (2006:15) expounds this problem when he extrapolates that:

> Everywhere, African post-colonial regimes have on paper raised the status of the Indigenous African Languages, but nothing beyond this has invariably been achieved.

The above sentiment is shared by Mfum-Mensah (2005) who asserts that colonialism deprived the African child of his or her cultural heritage. Thus, in the context of Unizulu, isiZulu was only used for courses offered in the then Department of IsiZulu Namagugu, now called the Department of African Languages and Culture. The current Draft of the University of Zululand language policy advances English and isiZulu in line with the objectives of South Africa's multilingual policy. Coincidentally, the dialogue about reviving indigenous African languages ensues at a time when, Unizulu's first black Rector, Prof. A.C. Nkabinde, a man who fostered the culture of academic discourse in indigenous African languages and whose work fuelled a desire to preserve isiZulu as an indigenous language, has just been laid to rest (Mthiyane 2014:8).

It has been established that the issue of language policy in institutions of higher learning is not a matter of choice but it is a mandatory one in post-apartheid South Africa. Thus in order to derive optimum benefit from South Africa's multilingual society proficiency and awareness are encouraged. With the Unizulu situated in the heart of the province of KwaZulu-Natal where the majority of the population speaks isiZulu, it follows that a vast number of students comes from surrounding communities. These students have been schooled in English as a medium of instruction from very early ages, in line with the scenario presented in the introduction of this paper. Their mother tongue has not been fully integrated with English thus creating knowledge gaps. As part of my duties when I was employed at Unizulu, I was to teach an undergraduate component of a module which was aimed at introducing students to research. Furthermore, students taking this module do all other modules in the Department of African Languages and Culture in isiZulu.

Without any resources in place I set out to prepare a manual in which I simplified points that I deemed important in the introductory course of

research. Since there were no relevant resources available for the course I made use of works published in English to prepare a manual for my students. It follows that my simplified version of the course manual was also in English. In the section that follows I have not tried to be sophisticated in my methodology as I have allowed my experiences to talk for themselves without trying to force information into neat academic grids and conventional packages. In this article I am thus reporting on my first-hand experience which is, nonetheless, guided by the theory of self-reflexivity and scholarly literature.

Theoretical Framework

The notion of reflexivity has become progressively widespread in qualitative research as a way of supporting claims of reliability and trustworthiness (Rolfe 2006). It revolves around having an on-going dialogue with your total self about what you are facing as it happens (Nagala 2004). Its objective is to learn from ones' experiences with a purpose of cultivating the quality of ones' dealings with others in future encounters. Following this framework the researcher stops and reflects about his or her practice. In simple terms and as described by Mauthner and Doucet (1998) self-reflexivity, therefore, refers to reflecting upon and being considerate about our own personal, political and intellectual environments as researchers and making calculated adaptations in relation to our experiences. While Dowling (2006) makes a remarkable argument that there is no single established viewpoint on reflexivity as a theoretical basis in qualitative research, some facts as far as its trends are concerned are not disputed. In essence, therefore, reflexivity serves as a means of stimulating proficiency using reflection as a platform (Allyson 2007). In the context of my experiences in relation to lecturing language delivery modes with reference to the course in question, all these descriptions are befitting as my paper explains exactly what brought about change in my teaching style which is what this article reports about. The reflection draws on similar studies involving interactions between teachers and their students where reflexivity was employed (Kane *et. al.* 2002; 2006 and 2013) and Kane and Staiger (2008). However, I need to point out that the variables and settings in the cited studies were different from my current study since language was not a point of departure. Thus, this article reports on facts as I

experienced them and their impact on me as well as on my students. No matter how unsophisticated the report may seem it is a true reflection of my observations and as such deserves to be accepted as it is.

Methodology

My data collection methodology is, in the main, influenced by Kane who, in collaboration with a number of scholars, has and continues to effectively make use of students' performance records as a point of departure in studies which deal with accountability in the classroom environment, teacher-student effectiveness and measuring one's performance (Kane *et al.* 2002, 2006, and 2013). The same discourse is also taken up by Aaronson *et al.* (2007) and Tyler *et al.* (2010) indicating the need for teachers and university lecturers to constantly refer to students' records as a barometer of their own accountability to those entrusted to them. This is one of the commendable ways of evaluating one's performance. Even though the above measures were not language related *per se* as has already been pointed out, they are, nevertheless, relevant in this discussion as the end product is the same; quality assurance of our teaching methods and advancement of student success rate. It must be noted that while the article deals with three cohorts, it is my approach and the results yielded that are of essence in this discussion.

The scope of the data used in this article is in the form of students' grades from students' records in the said module and spanning a period of three years. Being a first semester course, *Introduction to Research* is a component of a module named *Heritage, isiNtu Linguistics and Introduction to Research* as has already been stated. It is taught between January and June. Therefore, the data used in this article comes from 2012 (January-June), 2013 (January-June) and 2014 (January to June). In each year, the data comprises an average of four continuous assessment activities during the semester, excluding final examinations. The four assessment tools were in the form of a test, individually written assignments, written group assignments and group presentation based on the course manual. The rationale for excluding final examination results is that they include students' grades from two other components taught by other colleagues that are not part of this paper. This article thus confines itself to students' scores attained in only my component of the module.

In 2012 the assessments were derived from the manual in which only **English resources** had been made use of and which I had taught **entirely in English**. Students' responses were also given solely in English. The total number of students who were registered during this year was 198. At the end of the semester the students obtained the following marks which follow the grading system of Unizulu:

TABLE 1: Students' grades when both the Introduction to Research Manual and the medium of instruction were only English

Year	Registered students	Grades % & Description	Frequency	Average in %
2012	198	75 and above (Distinction)	0	0
		65-74 (Merit)	20	10
	(MY MEDIAN)	50-64 (Pass)	99	50
		0-49 (Fail)	79	40

The above poor performance reflected in student grades suggested to me that there was something I was not doing quite right. Since I was the one who had designed the course from scratch I needed to evaluate it in order to improve the quality of my students' performance. I therefore took an initiative and did some introspection on the language delivery mode that I was using. It was against this background that in 2013 I resorted to using the **same manual** while introducing isiZulu in its teaching since it was the home language of all students. However, English was not done away with as assignments and tests could be written in any of the two languages. The results were better than in 2012. They were as follows.

TABLE 2: Students' grades when the Introduction to Research Manual was only available in English but the medium of instruction was English and IsiZulu

Year	Registered students	Grades % & Description	Frequency	Average in %
2013	219	75 and above (Distinction)	5	2
		65-74 (Merit)	62	28
	(MY MEDIAN)	50-64 (Pass)	108	49
		0-49 (Fail)	47	21

The gradual progress in student performance in 2013 in comparison to 2012 encouraged me to move a step further in improving student grades. Hence in 2014 I translated the English version of my manual from English into isiZulu. I believed that the strategy would further enhance results. My translation was guided by Descriptive Translation theories which maintain that translations can never be thorough equivalents of their originals since every translation encompasses a certain amount of manipulation for a particular purpose (Hermans 1985). Taking the argument forward, Lefevere (1992) and Bassnett-McGurie (2002) assert that the socio-cultural environment in which translations take place should be considered at all times when translating. These specialists claim that translations are never produced in a vacuum but that they are part of a larger system and should, therefore, be described in terms of the target system. In cognizance of the above and fully aware of my limitations since there was no research terminology that had been agreed upon, precautions were taken to ensure that students derived maximum benefit from the exercise. As a result students were given both English and isiZulu versions of the manual. I also made use of both versions when I taught the module. My classes turned into fully-fledged bilingual sessions with students continuing to do assignments in a language of their choice. The table below reflects accelerated students' achievement under reviewed dual media of instruction.

TABLE 3: Students' grades when both the Introduction to Research Manual and the medium of instruction were English and IsiZulu

Year	Registered students	Grades % & Description	Frequency	Average in %
2014	258	75 and above (Distinction)	49	19
		65-74 (Merit)	131	51
	(MY MEDIAN)	50-64 (Pass)	53	20
		0-49 (Fail)	25	10

Data Analysis

The analysis must be read against the idea of *ceteris parabis*. This Latin phrase means that one may arrive at valid assumptions by controlling other variables that could affect one's assumptions (Boutilier *et al.* 2004). Therefore in the case of this paper without bringing on complicated statistical analysis to the tables above, I am particularly examining student performance against the progressive integration of isiZulu and English. A quick look at the tables above shows that there is a steady improvement in student grades between 2012 and 2014. When teaching and learning were solely in English student performance was unequivocally very poor. For example there were no students in the category 75 and above (Distinction) with the failure rate standing at 40%. Students at the median level (50-64 and 65-74) comprised 60% (See Table 1).

When I introduced isiZulu in my teaching in 2013 and allowed students to use either English or isiZulu in their assessments there was a rise in the student pass rate. Even though the manual was still only available in English, there was a slight improvement in the 75% and above bracket with 5 students obtaining a Distinction as opposed to none in 2012. In the 50-64 and 65-74 there was 77% achievement rate and the drop to 21% in the failure rate indicates that the language freedom that students were given worked to their advantage (See Table 2).

After the manual was translated into isiZulu in 2014 while the English version also remained available, there was an even greater improvement in student performance. The percentage rise of 19% distinctions, a drop to 10% in the failure rate and a median drop to 71% from previous 77% average shows that language freedom has a positive impact on students. A massive drop in the failure rate and a move from median to a higher bracket attest to this reality (See Table 3).

Implications of Self-reflexivity

Self-reflexivity implies that one has to constantly review one's ways of doing things as this serves as a barometer to measure one's performance in a particular context. In line with (Allyson 2007) who argues that self-reflexivity can be used as a podium for enhancing proficiency I believe that this is exactly what it did as far as my component of the module was concerned. When I adopted a different style of teaching by gradually introducing isiZulu, students accomplished better results. Similarly, as attested to by Clemensen (2010) mother-tongue teaching tremendously empowers students. When isiZulu was introduced, not only did it alleviate my anxiety about student performance, but students also emerged stronger. The 2014 class who had a privilege of a dual language teaching and learning experience in every manner became a better manageable class than the 2012 and 2013 classes. When all material was readily available in English and isiZulu students found freedom in consulting both versions and to weigh which one was more accessible to them. The availability of material in both languages coupled with the freedom of choice in their usage cannot be overemphasized in our transforming society where indigenous African languages require promotion and development. Because students had both manuals even those who opted to do their assingments in English felt comfortable to do so because the isiZulu version gave them assurance that what they were writing in English was indeed what was explained in the isiZulu version. The situation inadvertently promoted dual medium of teaching and learning while supporting students in owning knowledge (Table 3).

Conclusion

One of the responsibilities of PANSALB is to 'promote and create conditions for the development and use of all official languages' (Mesthrie 2002:24). Because English, as one of the official languages, is already well developed, in support of South Africa's multilingual policy, isiZulu, like other African languages that did not receive parity in the apartheid era, needs to be increasingly developed to an extent that it can find room in the South African classroom even where non isiZulu students are concerned. In this article I have pointed out how I had, in the beginning of my career at Unizulu, used English resources to compile my students' manual which I also taught purely in English overlooking the fact that all students were Zulu speakers. With gradual introduction of isiZulu and integrating it with English an observable improvement in student performance was seen. When the manual was translated into isiZulu the improvement was even greater.

The article has also talked about the concept of self-reflexivity as a way of measuring one's teaching methods. It was established that the reflexive approach is effective in assessing and improving one's teaching methodologies while also enhancing students' performance. The discussion has further demonstrated that in a multilingual society like South Africa and in keeping with the country's multilingual policy, it would be fallacious to comply with models that entirely adopt substitution of ex-colonial foreign languages with indigenous languages as media of instruction. Instead the paper has advocated for a middle way which seeks to see indigenous languages being steadily developed to an extent that they can also be confidently used to reflect a transformed society. Thus for a bilingual lecturer, in particular, it would be to the great advantage of students to impart knowledge using dual media especially in those courses which use concepts which students are not acquainted with. It is also a contention in this paper that when isiZulu and English are integrated students perform better across the board.

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