Mother Tongue Teaching at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: Opportunities and Threats

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Abstract

The paper presents my experiences of teaching Life Skills using isiZulu as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) to Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students, who were specializing in the Foundation Phase (FP) in 2008 and 2009 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The aim of the article is to reflect on the opportunities and threats encountered during the implementation process with these two cohorts. During contact sessions, new experiences were recorded and were then analysed and two categories were formed. Under each category themes were developed and experiences were distributed accordingly. The findings demonstrate the opportunities such as increase in vocabulary, good performance and high students' involvement in class activities. The study indicated time constraints, shortage of expertise and negative attitudes as the threats of using isiZulu as LoLT in higher education. The study also suggests recommendations that would strengthen the initiative.

Keywords: mother tongue, Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), University (Higher Education), students, opportunities, threats, Foundation phase

Introduction and Background

The transformation agenda in South African universities has had many effects. One of these is the formulation of a language policy which addresses

the needs of the communities served. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) drew up its language policy in compliance with the needs of the province in which it is situated. The UKZN Language Policy of 2006 capitalizes on the use of isiZulu as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT). Its main goal is to be the key player in the successful implementation of this policy (UKZN 2006: 1). Balfour (2006: 1) the then chairperson of the university's language policy argues that language lies at the heart of education transformation. According to Balfour (2006:1), '*the UKZN policy is a key aspect of what transformation must mean to all participants in education in KwaZulu-Natal'*. It is against this background that the Faculty of Education decided to offer Literacy and Life Skills (two of the three Foundation Phase specialization modules) in a dual medium of instruction (English and isiZulu). Of all the universities in South Africa, UKZN is one of the few who are implementing the policy as the Language Policy Framework for South African Higher Education (LPFSAHE) states:

> While most institutions are committed in their language policy documents to the development of the relevant indigenous languages, only two or three can be said to be doing something practical in order to promote their use as Languages of Tuition (Council on Higher Education 2001).

This is so because the university wishes to be the key player in the successful implementation of the policy (UKZN 2006) and in transformation as such. There are two main instruments that the university uses to promote multilingualism and the use of African languages. The first one is the South Africa-Norway Tertiary Education Development Programme (SANTED). This was initiated in 2007 as a way of responding to the policy. This project offered the Masikhulume programme where communicative isiZulu is taught to English speaking students and staff. The aim of the programme was to promote isiZulu proficiency and to produce teachers who can interact professionally in both languages (isiZulu and English).

The second instrument is the PGCE/FP qualification where some of the modules are offered in isiZulu. The purpose of using isiZulu as the LoLT at UKZN is twofold. Besides the need to transform and promote multilingualism and the use of African languages as the LPFSAHE (2001)

states, the university seeks to comply with the Department of Education's (DoE) Language in Education Policy (LiEP) of 1997, which stipulates that a child at the Foundation Phase has to be taught in mother tongue. The LiEP recommends an additive approach to teaching (DoE 1997). To produce teachers who are in a good position to implement this policy, the Faculty had to take a clear stance of teaching in mother tongue (MT), to enable these graduates to plan, develop resources and teach in a language of the child. Besides using isiZulu as LoLT the UKZN policy stipulates the need to develop isiZulu to the level where it can be used for research as well (Ndimande-Hlongwa, Balfour, Mkhize & Engelbrecht 2010). The UKZN policy chose isiZulu because it is the dominant language of the province (KwaZulu-Natal) and a national lingua franca, a language that is widely spoken across the country (South Africa). Moodley (2009) confirms that UKZN has the majority of 57% of African Language speakers and she also states that the majority are isiZulu speakers.

The offering of some modules in isiZulu started in 2008 when a new PGCE/FP qualification was introduced. The first cohort had forty six students, only thirty six students registered Life Skills as one of their electives and of the thirty six students twenty one chose to study in isiZulu. The second cohort had thirty two students and of the thirty two students isiZulu class had only twelve. These students were entitled to three electives which are Foundation Phase specialisation, two are offered in a dual medium of instruction, and these are Life Skills and Literacy. The content taught to two groups of students is the same for both groups. The classroom methods include discussions, lectures, presentations by students, and they were also given activities to develop resources (projects) tests and at the end of the year examinations were administered to them. Another key point to those who undertook their training in isiZulu was to do their teaching practice in schools where isiZulu is the LoLT. Papers set for examination and tests consisted of two sections, English as Section A and isiZulu as Section B. Students were given equal opportunities in all their activities.

What is a Mother Tongue?

Alexander (2009: 2) describes a mother tongue as the language that the child knows best when they first come into contact with the school. Teaching a

learner through that language therefore has advantages. The Faculty of Education at the University views the need to teach in mother tongue as an important consideration. It takes into account that the practice has the benefit of expanding cognitive skills for students as they learn through the language they best understand (Alexander 2009). If they learn in such a climate they are in a better position to apply the skills gained. According to DoE (1997) there is a wide range of ideas that exist towards multilingual education, ranging from opinions supporting the cognitive benefits and cost-effectiveness of teaching through one medium (home language) and learning additional languages as subjects (DoE 1997: 2). The aim of the LiEP is to maintain and develop the home language while providing access to and effective attainment of additional languages as the policy insists (DoE 1997: 3).

The General Impacts of Mother Tongue Teaching

Alexander (2009: 2) asserts that chances of success are increased many times for the majority of the learners if the LoLT is the mother tongue. For learners to attain this level, suitable teachers are those who are well-grounded in the language and in teaching through it, as Alexander states (2009: 2). Therefore, this programme is aimed at producing a kind of a teacher who will be highly equipped to implement the LiEP.

Moreover, Kincholoe (2008: 2) in his study on critical pedagogy urges that a social and educational vision of justice and equality should be the foundation of all education. Grandish (2009) argues specifically that the government and teachers are depriving the youth of their basic linguistic rights by not providing mother tongue teaching through the language of a learner or giving them an opportunity to choose. This practice acknowledges the rights of students and learners in schools. Through this practice, the principle of inclusion is being acknowledged as well as democracy in education. This is supported by Kincheloe (2008: 2), who states that education should not hurt students but it should promote emancipatory change and the cultivation of the intellect.

Studies on the African continent by researchers such as Ejieh (2004: 74), Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2007:100), and Aliyu (2008) bear testimony to the benefits of mother tongue teaching. Ejieh (2004:74) and Kamwangamalu (2000:122) state that children will gain culturally, socially, linguistically and

cognitively through the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction throughout the six years of primary school, and that they will have improved English based on a well-developed first language. Ejieh (2004) stresses the importance of a well trained English language teacher so that learners gain a good command of English. Alexander (2009) further states the advantages of using mother tongue as the LoLT. He maintains that if it is the same as the home language, there is a natural continuity between the home and the school, therefore performance will flourish. Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2007: 100) confirm that the mother tongue provides a more rewarding learning atmosphere as school learning and experience become an extension of home experience, and this is a condition that guarantees cognitive balance and good performance.

Kamwangamalu (2000: 121), Neke (2005: 75), and Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2007: 100) claim that teaching in mother tongue makes lessons more interesting. They also claim that teaching in the mother tongue improves the quality of education and preserves the language. This is because a mother tongue is the language which a person has acquired in early years (Alexander 2009) and which eventually becomes his other instrument of thought and communication, (Kamwangamalu 2000: 121). In Tanzania, Kiswahili has been used as a medium of instruction in primary education and has catered for a large student population with great success, compared to the use of English in the high schools (Neke 2005:76). This supports the point that learners learn best in their own language.

While the practice has many benefits there is also a cautionary side to it, and several challenges are experienced in the process. Kunene (2009: 1) reveals challenges faced in the implementation of the LiEP in schools. Parents' perceptions, school enrolment, teachers' attitudes and views, teachers' limitations, didactic competence, and learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) were some challenges faced in KwaZulu-Natal. Parents view English as a status symbol. Therefore they do not want their children to be subjected to isiZulu as LoLT since this will interfere with the preferred language. To keep the enrolment high in schools (since there is a monetary incentive accompanying huge enrolments), English has to be used at the expense of the home language (HL) to attract parents. The issue of attitudes is a challenge at school and at the higher education level (Hlongwa 2009). Govender (2009: 11) reports that at the University of Limpopo a bilingual

degree was launched and staff from monolingual disciplines threatened its sustainability. People look down upon their own indigenous languages; they do not believe that their home languages can ever become as developed as English or Afrikaans, as Alexander (2009: 2) asserts. Apart from attitudes, in some institutions mother tongue instruction brings financial constraints (Woldermariam 2007) as some resources need to be developed.

According to MacKenzie (2009: 396), in a study conducted in India, the results show that while access to school has increased and enrolment rates are improving, the dropout rates are still alarmingly high and achievement levels are low. This proves that the practice of learning through the foreign language impacts negatively on the learners' academic performance as Ntombela and Mhlongo (2004: 8) assert. One of the reasons stated is that education is conducted in a language learners do not understand, and thereby exposed to an unfamiliar cultural context. The study also reports that an education which begins in the mother tongue and builds competence in the second language before using it as medium of instruction, consequently cuts down linguistic and cultural barriers faced by students when starting school, is a key factor in raising the educational attainment of speakers of the marginal languages (MacKenzie 2009: 370).

In Ghana, Opuku-Amakwa (2009: 130) asserts that the use of English in classrooms creates anxiety among students and thus hinders effective classroom participation. Though not researched as extensively as schools learning through a foreign language is a challenge to university students and not only to primary and post primary sectors. Singh-Ghuman (2002:48) states that in America, Asian students use to score lower marks than their white counterparts on tests. Some students do not perform to the best of their ability because of their inability to express themselves in writing; a poor listening skill is also a factor. Lam (2002:251) gives evidence of the learner who learnt two languages, Russian and English at the same time. The learner states that his energies were not focused and he did not learn either language well as Lam (2002) states.

Theoretical Framework

Constructionism is the theoretical framework that was used to underpin this study. According to Crotty (1998: 42) constructionism is a theory on how learning occurs. He describes constructionism as:

> the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.

The practice of using indigenous languages as languages of learning and teaching (LoLT) is new in higher education institutions; therefore it needs to be interpreted and new learnings and meanings should be attached to it so as to improve the quality. Crotty (1998:43) claims that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. The experience of teaching through isiZulu could have wider implications for higher education in multilingual contexts, if interpreted properly. Constructivist approaches, according to Woolfolk (2001: 330), involve authentic or real life tasks, social negotiation and shared responsibility as part of the learning. My experiences of teaching through isiZulu will be interpreted and new knowledge and meaning will be deduced.

Methodology

The research on which this paper is based falls within the interpretive paradigm. It is a qualitative case study involving students who were doing the PGCE/FP in 2008 and 2009 and I as a lecturer. This paradigm was deemed appropriate because the aim of the article is to interpret the experiences of teaching in isiZulu and make meaning out of it. The entire paper drew on lived experiences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000: 268) of lecturing in isiZulu.

To gather data, my personal experiences of being involved in teaching Life Skills in isiZulu were listed in a note book during contact sessions and any other time when engaging with Life Skills work (students work, marking or preparation). These experiences were compressed into categories which led to the emergence of two definite themes: opportunities and threats. Under opportunities, themes like freedom of expression, participation, increased vocabulary and performance emerged, whereas under threats, themes such as time constraints, lack of expertise, amount of work, shortage of staff appeared and attitudes, terminology and resources were discovered. These experiences were recorded during and after the Life Skills

classroom discussion, depending on what was interesting during that particular session. Some experiences were recorded spontaneously as they occurred outside the lecture room, and were not the product of the contact sessions. This was done from 2008, which was the first year of implementation up to mid year of 2009. The study captures experiences with two cohorts of students.

The aim of the article is to reflect on my experiences of teaching Life Skills to PGCE / FP students in isiZulu. The study seeks to answer two questions:

- What are the opportunities of teaching in mother tongue in higher education (UKZN)?

- What are the threats of teaching in mother tongue in higher education (UKZN)?

Findings

1. Opportunities

1.1 Students' Participation

Students got a chance of expressing themselves freely, without fear of misusing the language. Discussions were lively, resembling a social club. Participation of students was extremely good. We were able to get different views because everyone had something to say. Although this is a good thing, it was time-consuming because it took us too long to arrive at a conclusion or to come to an agreement. Students were able to produce new thoughts in their discussions as they sometimes memorise facts and reproduce them when taught in a foreign language. The richness of the language was displayed in their discussions, where they even used idiomatic expressions.

1.2 Performance

Students performed very well in all their activities. They all passed the examination with good marks than might have been the case if they were assessed in English. Their arguments in the discussion section were of good

quality. Their performance was better than those isiZulu students who preferred to remain in an English class.

1.3 Translation of Terms

The implementation of the policy by teaching through isiZulu has contributed on the translation of terms by the SANTED project. This was a self-enriching activity as we learned new concepts, concepts that are not used in our daily conversation, words that are newly developed, words that were used by indigenous people, or borrowed from other languages or those that just emerged because of the advancement of technology. We got attracted to the term '*incazelojikelele'* an unusual term which means overview. Students used this term more often, it actually excited them.

1.4 Colloquium

The practice of using isiZulu as the LoLT gave rise to the colloquium which was themed "*Mother Tongue teaching in the early years"* this was for the first time the discipline of Early Childhood Education / Foundation Phase to host such an activity. This was aimed at challenging the debates around mother tongue teaching at higher education and school level. The theme was chosen since it is currently a topical issue in South Africa and also this contributed in encouraging school teachers to implement the Language in Education Policy of 1997. This colloquium was a huge success as it was attended by different stakeholders from all parts of the province.

2. Threats

2.1 Time Constraints

Students were given equal amounts of time to complete their activities. I discovered that during tests and examinations, the English group finished work much earlier than the isiZulu group. The IsiZulu group needed extra time. With regard to preparation I noticed that I spent less time in grasping the content of the lecture but preparing transparencies, slides and question papers for tests and examination in isiZulu was time consuming as it was not

easy to identify spelling mistakes because all the words were underlined in red. This resulted to me going through the work over and over again. I had to use the dictionary most of the time to check if the words I used are correct.

2.2 Lack of Expertise

During the examination season, it was difficult to find an external examiner with expertise in the Foundation Phase, as well as in Life Skills and Language (isiZulu). The examiners identified had at least two of the requirements. Most of them had Foundation Phase and Life Skills expertise but did not speak isiZulu. Some had isiZulu, knowledge of Life Skills but no Foundation Phase expertise, and others had isiZulu and Foundation Phase expertise but no knowledge of Life Skills. The situation demanded that we utilize examiners with two of the requirements.

2.3 Amount of Work

Although it is appreciated that students expressed themselves freely, it had an impact on the amount of work they produced compared to the work that was produced by the English class. They even included information that was not necessary. The English group produced a reasonable amount of work whereas the isiZulu group produced large amounts of work. This was caused by the fact that a short word in English becomes long in isiZulu e.g. *'sky'* is translated as *'isibhakabhaka'* in isiZulu. One word in English can be explained in more than one word in isiZulu, e.g. *'blue'* is translated as *'kuluhlaza okusasibhakabhaka'*, and a short sentence in English turns into a paragraph in isiZulu. This had a negative impact on the marker; a lot of time had to be spent reading large amounts of work.

2.4 Shortage of Staff

The programme is running with the shortage of human resources. Only two members of staff are permanent and are isiZulu speaking and the rest are contracted. Students want to take all three electives in isiZulu, including the

Numeracy module and this is impossible due to this shortage. This has financial constraints to the university.

2.5 Attitude

During the orientation day we inform students that we offer Literacy and Life Skills in two languages, and therefore we encourage isiZulu speaking students to study both modules in isiZulu. Students hold different attitudes towards using isiZulu as LoLT. Some students were not willing to learn through the medium of isiZulu. The Language in Education Policy of 1997 had to be brought to their attention. Some students mentioned that isiZulu is a difficult language to learn through. It is the language of communication only. Most students who had negative attitudes were those who went to multiracial schools (ex-model C schools), and who were good in English. They stated that they were poor in writing isiZulu, that they were able to speak it fluently but not write it correctly.

2.6 Terminology

Terms in isiZulu are underdeveloped. There are many words which do not have isiZulu equivalents. We had to code-switch to English in order to make meaning of what we are learning. We also encountered disagreement between concepts. When we translate a word from English to isiZulu we sometimes end up with another meaning, and when we switch back to English, we encounter a different meaning. For example, for the word facilitator we used the term '*umqondisi'*; when we take the term '*umqondisi*' back to English, we arrive at another meaning—'director'. We also discovered when we use an English-isiZulu dictionary that there are words that we do not know. They seem new and very difficult to grasp and to contextualize them.

There are words which are not used in public in isiZulu. They are labeled as taboo, for example, parts of the body. In English, it is easy to call these parts by their names whereas in isiZulu it is regarded as being disrespectful. A female private part (*vagina*) is called '*cake' or 'cow' or rabbit or mouse*, depending on a local dialect. A *penis* is called '*stick'*. These

terms might apply to a particular area and in another area they use another term to refer to it. These words sometimes do not convey the actual message to someone you are talking to. This results in confusion among some people as terms are not standardized.

2.7 Resources

A huge, seemingly insurmountable, challenge is the shortage of resources. It is costly to translate the entire set of materials into isiZulu. Students are given materials in English and notes in isiZulu. The curriculum document that is currently being used in the Foundation Phase, the Foundations for Learning is in English. This document has the prepared (scripted) lesson plans for Literacy and Numeracy which student teachers (and even teachers in schools) are to translate before they teach. A Life Orientation document which is used in the teaching of Life Skills is in English only. Student teachers are to translate the assessment standards first before they prepare the lesson. Students sometimes complain of the difficulty of translating the materials into IsiZulu. They even get tempted to write lesson plans, tests and examinations in English.

Discussion

Both opportunities and threats have some implications for students, lecturers and the institution itself. Teaching and learning in mother tongue empowered both the lecturer and the students. As it appears in the data that new words were learnt and this denotes the increase of vocabulary. Students' performance improved as it was noted that isiZulu students who were in the alternative group scored a bit lower marks. And this is the opportunity students were long deprived of, to voice their views during class discussion. In the findings, it is highlighted that class discussions were animated, resembling a social group. This is confirmed in the literature, where Kamwangamalu (2000:122), Janshala (2003), Neke (2005: 75), and Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2007: 100) claim that teaching in the mother tongue makes lessons interesting. The performance of students fared well, and supports the view of Ejieh (2004:74) and Kamwangamalu (2000:122), who claim that

children will gain culturally, socially, linguistically and cognitively through the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

However, there were some challenges noted in the implementation process. A challenge such as time constraints, where isiZulu group finished their activities after English group had long finished was pointed out. Lack of expertise is also a course for concern where an external moderator does not meet all the requirements. Attitudes are also seen as a stumbling block which hinders the development of the programme. Shortage of resources and terminology are serious challenges in using isiZulu as LoLT like all African languages. Some studies also proved that some people hold negative attitudes towards isiZulu being the LoLT (Hlongwa 2009 & Govender 2009), which I also encouneterd with some PGCE students.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The aim of this article was to reflect on the experiences of teaching in the medium of instruction of isiZulu. This paper highlights some important considerations and potential pitfalls that should be taken into account in order to make the practice of teaching in the mother tongue a feasible one at both levels, the higher education level and the school level. This practice brought an awareness that isiZulu can be used as the LoLT like English and Afrikaans successfully. These learnings are used to strengthen and refine the programme so that in future some challenges are overcome and opportunities increased. From this study it is also learnt that the university managed to change its culture by implementing a language policy which stresses the use of isiZulu.

It is appreciated that students learn in their mother tongue at a Higher Education Institution, which is a very rare practice. However this practice has some implications. First and foremost, it has a huge financial impact in the Faculty of Education. More lecturers with expertise in isiZulu are needed. Students enjoy this initiative; they are therefore questioning why they are not accommodated in the Numeracy module which is learnt in English only. This means that this module has to be offered in isiZulu as well. Attitudes are still a stumbling block in the use of African languages as the LoLT where a group of isiZulu speaking students identifies with English speaking people, regarding their own language as the language of

communication only. More seminars and colloquia need to take place to educate people of the importance of mother tongue teaching.

It is mentioned that students had a freedom of expression that resulted to lively class discussions. At the same time students need to be taught to write academically, and to provide answers that are concise and relevant. This will result to them producing manageable amounts of work which is not time-consuming to the marker. Students could gain more vocabulary if terms are formed so that each English word has its equivalent in isiZulu. Translation of study materials and of high frequency terms is necessary. This includes the translation of curriculum documents, particularly, the Foundations for Learning document and the Life Skills assessment standards. Resources for academic learning and for classroom practice should be made available so that students do not get frustrated during the teaching practicum. The unavailability of resources in the mother tongue (isiZulu) has an impact on the implementation of the UKZN language policy and the DoE LiEP.

Since it is noted that the isiZulu group ran short of time during assessments, it would be better to extend time to accommodate them. Alternatively, they should be restricted to a certain number of words for each question, so that they are on par with the English group. The issues related to the lack of expertise in the moderation of examination question papers are not easy to eliminate. The consideration of two requirements, instead of three, is the only possible solution at the moment.

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