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Multilingual education in South African universities: Policies, pedagogy and practicality

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ABSTRACT

Universities in South Africa have over the last few years adopted multilingual language policies with a view to implementing multilingual education. The adoption of these language policies and the implementation of multilingual education accords with the new democratic constitution which recognizes 11 official languages at national level and the *Language Policy for Higher Education* (LPHE) adopted by government in 2002 to promote equity of access and success for all students in higher education. The aim of this article is to discuss the implementation of multilingual education in traditionally white English universities, and at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The argument of this article is that although multilingual education is not yet fully realized at UCT, the existing multilingual language policy has created agentive and implementational spaces for multilingual education in that university. The article draws insight from ethnographic theories and the multilingual education projects initiated at the university.

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1. Introduction

South Africa's population of approximately 50 million people is serviced by 23 universities. Since the democratic change of 1994 and the resultant increase of linguistic diversity at tertiary institutions, government has developed various multilingual language policy frameworks to ensure equity of access and success for all students. The first policy document that lays the foundation for the adoption of multilingualism in teaching and learning programmes at tertiary institutions is South Africa's Constitution which recognizes 11 languages as official languages at national level. These languages are English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, Ndebele, Swati, Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho (Pedi), Tswana, Venda and Tsonga. To give effect to this constitutional provision, the government adopted the *Language Policy for Higher Education* (LPHE) in 2002 ([Department of Education, 2002](#)). This policy requires universities to develop multilingual language policies and to implement multilingualism in their institutional environment and in teaching and learning programmes. Consequently, most universities (87%) have already developed multilingual language policies. However, some of these language policies are still very symbolic and their implementation in teaching and learning programmes remains a challenge.

The aim of this article is to discuss the implementation of multilingual education at traditionally white English medium universities with special reference to the University of Cape Town (hereafter UCT). It is the contention of this article that although the multilingual language policy at this university has not yet been fully implemented, its adoption opens up ideological, implementational and agentive spaces for multilingual education at UCT. To support this argument, I will draw insight from ethnographic studies of scholars such as [Hornberger and Johnson \(2007\)](#) and [Johnson \(2009\)](#). In fact, [Hornberger \(2002, p. 30\)](#) describes language policy as “essentially about opening up ideological and implementational space in the environment for as many languages as possible”. The advantage of an ethnographic approach is that unlike traditional or

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neoclassical approaches to language policy implementation which lays much emphasis on the role of authoritative bodies such as government in language policy implementation, the ethnographic approach recognizes the role of individual agents in this regard (Heller, 2007; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). In contrast to traditional language planning where the power to implement a language policy rests with central authorities, the ethnographic approach consists in lecturers and students being seen as social actors who actively adjust, change, transform and deploy their valuable linguistic resources in their interactions with others. Thus, both teachers and learners are considered active agents in prying open the ideological and implementation spaces for multilingual education in South African universities.

The article begins by defining the term “multilingual education” and then gives an overview of the existing language policy frameworks underlying the implementation of multilingual education in South African universities, and UCT in particular. This is followed by a discussion of theoretical and practical strategies adopted by UCT in implementing multilingual education.

2. The term ‘multilingual education’

The use of the term ‘multilingual education’ is fairly recent in language planning literature. UNESCO, for example, only adopted the term in 1992 as part of its General Conference Resolution no. 30/C. According to this resolution the term ‘multilingual education’ refers to “the use of at least three languages, the mother tongue, a regional or national language and an international language in education.” (UNESCO, 2003). This definition is based on the view that the requirements of global and national participation and the specific needs of particular, culturally and linguistically distinct communities can only be addressed by multilingual education. Thus multilingual education seeks to strike a balance between the global and the local, that is, to maximize the benefits of internationalization while promoting the preservation of cultural identities and mobility and dialogue.

In South Africa, the term ‘multilingual education’ implies the use of at least two languages as media of instruction and the addition of “a second and even a third language to each pupil’s linguistic repertoire in ways which would best guarantee both academic and linguistic success” (Heugh, 1995, p. 6). Accordingly, within the context of UCT, multilingual education entails the use of English in complementarity with students’ first languages and the learning of another additional language, preferably Afrikaans or Xhosa. In other South African universities, the term ‘multilingual education’ is defined differently according to particular contexts in which the policies are implemented. It is difficult to define this term in a way which has general applicability for all universities. It would be better to think of definitions in terms of working models which may also change because of changing circumstances.

It is important to note that in other parts of the world other terms such as ‘plurilingualism’ are used instead of the term ‘multilingual education’. In Europe, for example, the Council of Europe distinguishes between multilingualism and plurilingualism. The term ‘multilingualism’ is used to refer ‘exclusively to the presence of several languages in a given space, independently of those who use them’, whereas the term ‘plurilingualism’ is used to refer to an individual’s “ability to use languages to varying degrees and for distinct purposes” (Council of Europe, 2007, p. 17). Notwithstanding these differences, the term “multilingualism” is used in this study to refer to both meanings, that is, the use of three or more languages in one context and the individual’s ability to use different languages or their varieties. Thus, multilingual education implies that different languages can be used in a classroom situation catering for the linguistic needs of different students, or students who have repertoires of languages or language varieties that cut across each other.

A further complication with regard to the definition of the term ‘multilingual education’ is the construct of ‘language’ itself. There are two views in this regard. The first view regards languages as strictly separable, isolable or discreet entities. The second one regards languages as more permeable, more liquid-like, interpenetrating each other (Garcia, 2009). Recently, there has been a growing body of literature in support of the latter view. Accordingly, multilingual education may not necessarily involve discrete languages only, but also language varieties that cut across each other or intermingle with each other.

3. The language policy frameworks

3.1. The constitutional framework

The statutory provision that laid the foundation for the implementation of multilingualism in South African universities is the Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) which recognizes 11 languages as official languages at national level. During the apartheid era, only English and Afrikaans were declared by law to be the only official languages that were permitted for the purpose of teaching and learning at tertiary institutions. Accordingly, universities in South Africa were divided in terms of language into English and Afrikaans medium universities. But under the new constitution, “everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable” (Section 29.2).

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