

University students' perspectives on an English-only language policy in Higher Education



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Dates:

Received: 19 Dec. 2021

Accepted: 03 June 2022

Published: 01 Nov. 2022

How to cite this article:

Ngidi SA, Mncwango EM. University students' perspectives on an English-only language policy in Higher Education. *J transdiscipl res S Afr*. 2022;18(1), a1189. <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v18i1.1189>

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The study aimed to determine students' perspectives on a shift from a dual-medium (English and Afrikaans) language policy to a monolingual (English-only) language policy at a University of Technology in South Africa and to establish whether the shift had any impact on student learning at the institution. The study used a quantitative method of inquiry, with a questionnaire used for data collection. The findings revealed that language-related challenges vary amongst students, and these can be categorised as low, medium and high language learning problems. The article concludes that the language policy shift does not reflect the multilingual nature of the country, student demographics or their language needs at the institution. Instead of addressing the real challenge facing the majority of students who speak Sesotho, it merely dropped a second medium of instruction (MOI), Afrikaans, instead of developing a dominant indigenous language (Sesotho) for educational use alongside English and Afrikaans.

Transdisciplinarity Contribution: The article lays bare the access paradox in higher education owing to the misalignment between the country's progressive language policies and learning institutions' language policies. The students' perspectives bring a much-needed dimension to the ongoing debate on the use of the learners' home languages as languages of learning and teaching.

Keywords: language policy shift; English; indigenous languages; monolingual language policy; language rights.

Introduction

When apartheid was abolished in the early 1990s, new laws and policies regarding education in South Africa came into effect. In education, one of the major changes was the change in language policy, as prescribed in section 27 (2) of the *Higher Education Act of South Africa*.¹ Under the act, the Language Policy for Higher Education was introduced in 2002. The act noted that:

'[T]he role of language and access to language skills is critical to ensure the right of individuals to realise their full potential to participate and contribute to the social, cultural, intellectual, economic, academic and political life of South African Society.'² (p. 10)

However, the reality is that the majority of indigenous languages have been and still are marginalised, which does not promote multilingualism. Myers-Scotton³ found that speaking more than one language in one conversation in one day is the rule rather than the exception in Africa. Therefore, universities, like other educational institutions, are expected to reflect this diversity in their language policies. This would accommodate students who must struggle with English as a medium of instruction (MOI) and yet are expected to compete against those whose first language (L1) is English.

The insistence on English MOI at South African universities undermines the right of the majority of black students to receive tuition in their home language (HL), a right enjoyed by English L1 students. This makes learning an uphill battle for second language (L2) speakers of English, especially those from rural areas where exposure to the language is limited. As Banda⁴ puts it:

'[A]ny model that champions a single language as language of instruction would not be in sync with the linguistic situation and the frame of social networks of language usage in Africa.' (p. 5)

Therefore, in promoting multilingualism, institutions in different regions in South Africa ought to formulate their policies in line with the guidelines contained in the policy framework, considering their regional circumstances and the needs and preferences of communities, as stated in the constitution.⁵

The University of Technology, where the research was conducted, was established in 1981 as a Technikon, and it catered for Afrikaans and English-speaking students only, using a dual-medium policy (Afrikaans and English). In 2004, during the restructuring by the government, its Technikon status was elevated to that of a university of technology. Following the restructuring, in 2009 the institution's language policy shifted in favour of an English-only MOI. The authors argue in this article that, whilst the language policy shift at the University of Technology was intended to accommodate black students who were in the majority, according to the institution, dropping Afrikaans was of no consequence in achieving this objective, as its continued presence as a second MOI presented no barrier to learning for black students unless they were compelled to learn through the language, which was not the case. The argument is that there is merit in developing a majority indigenous language, like Sesotho in this case, as another possible language of learning. This would mitigate the learning challenges presented by L2 instruction to the majority of students who speak an indigenous language as their HL.

Aim and objectives

The objective of the study was to evaluate students' perspectives on the University of Technology's shift from a dual-medium language policy (English and Afrikaans) to a monolingual (English-only) language policy and to establish whether the shift had any impact on their learning. The study sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the students' perspectives regarding the language policy shift?
- Did the language policy shift have any impact on student learning?

Literature review

The hegemony of English in higher education in South Africa

English has dominated and continues to dominate as an MOI both in basic education (BE) and in higher education (HE), thereby affecting the majority of learners who speak it as L2, especially those from schools where exposure to the language is limited to the classroom.⁶ Ruiz⁷ is of the opinion that language touches on many aspects of social life and also found that linguistic discrimination is tantamount to discrimination in other aspects of social life touched by language. Banga and Suri⁸ support this view, claiming that 'The limit of my language is the limit of my world'. Language rights issues date back to the 1976 protest against instruction in Afrikaans, which went down in history as a catastrophe that was unparalleled. As some of the highlights in this regard, Webb⁹ mentions the large number of complaints submitted to PanSALB about the perceived violation of language rights and the establishment of a committee for marginalised languages. According to Kamwangamalu,¹⁰ one of the reasons in favour of the English language policy is that indigenous languages were subjected to years of discrimination of mother tongue education.

Roodt¹¹ opines that the design of a proper language policy and framework for the development of multilingualism is defeated by the fact that South Africa seems to be in favour of an English language policy. The evidence of this is that to date, a paucity of universities in South Africa offer tuition in indigenous languages in some of their programmes, whilst the rest only offer indigenous languages as elective modules or as major subjects within degree programmes that are offered mainly in English, with others offering some of their modules in indigenous languages. This practice is in contrast with section 29(2) of the Bill of Rights,¹² which stipulates that everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public education at institutions where the education is reasonably practicable. The 'reasonably practicable' part of the section is problematic in that educational institutions simply invoke it to cover their reluctance to implement its stipulations. Mutasa¹³ agrees that African languages appear to be under siege in tertiary institutions in spite of the commitment demonstrated by universities in their language policies. This clearly indicates that in South African universities, English is still a dominant language, and so far, it does not have competition.

The role of language in education

The role played by language in a person's self-esteem cannot be underscored enough. Language is at the centre of teaching and learning, as every student wants to access education, to succeed and (most importantly) to be able to compete favourably against other graduates. Manyike and Lemmer¹⁴ have observed that the majority of learners whose HL is not the MOI continue to experience academic underachievement as HL education is largely ignored by the education authorities in spite of rhetoric to the contrary. The question then becomes: how should language policies be formulated, and what will it take to implement them successfully to ensure that every student can access education without there being a language barrier to their learning?

In May 2018, a move by the North-West University to change its language policy from Afrikaans to English MOI at its Potchefstroom campus was met with resistance from Afrikaans-speaking students who preferred Afrikaans, whilst non-Afrikaans students preferred English, and the university decided to invite students 'to sign a petition to express their language preferences before the matter is taken to a full council for ratification and approval'.¹⁵ Interestingly, the language policy matter was confined to the choice between the two languages, without opening it up to discuss other alternatives, given that there were majority languages as well at the institution. Preference for English in this case, therefore, should not be misconstrued – it is merely a better choice, especially for students who come from schools where Afrikaans is not offered even as a subject.

Several South African universities in the country are grappling with language-related protests, some of which

turn violent. These, according to Mavunga,¹⁶ are attributable to the unity amongst different student formations that are affiliated with different political parties. Although it is not possible to determine the reasons why the South African government allows non-implementation of the country's constitutional language stipulation in official places, including institutions of higher learning, five types of reasons for poor language management in South Africa have been distinguished by Mwaniki.¹⁷ These are political and bureaucratic factors, economic factors, sociolinguistic factors, theoretical factors and cultural factors. However, even where good language policies exist, they lack implementation, as observed by Mncwango.¹⁸

Mother tongue instruction

For a long time, issues of language in education have been raised because of poor performance of learners, especially in contexts where the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is not the learners' HL. Learner competence in the language of instruction is key to the learner's success, as incomprehension of learning materials inevitably leads to failure in most cases. As Spolsky¹⁹ puts it, '[i]t must be obvious to all that incomprehensible education is immoral'. Stoop²⁰ has attributed poor school performance and other literacy difficulties to a lack of mother-tongue education, as most learners in South Africa learn through a L2 medium, English, in most schools and institutions of higher learning. Learning in one's HL not only removes the learning barrier presented by L2 instruction but also increases participation and engagement.²¹

Whilst HL instruction is advocated by authors such as Alexander²² for early childhood, Hay²³ is of the view that HL instruction should continue for as long as possible, as it is associated with high academic achievement. This is in line with Bourdieu's²⁴ argument that language is a capital which, if learners lack it, may result in them (learners) being constrained or even silenced by specific expectations of discourse.

Methodology

A quantitative approach was used. Data were collected quantitatively using a questionnaire as a tool for data collection from students. Kabir²⁵ recommends the use of quantitative methods as they produce results that are 'easy to summarize, compare, and generalize'. The first section of the questionnaire (Section A) consisted of the biographical information of the respondents (gender, age, year of study, HL and faculty), whilst the second section (Section B) consisted of items on language-related learning challenges (speaking problems (items 1–8), listening problems (items 9–15), reading problems (items 16–21) and writing problems (items 22–28). With regard to Section B of the questionnaire, a Likert scale with four response alternatives or categories was used, namely: strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD). Ngidi²⁶ has identified two major advantages of such four categories. Firstly, they have been tested in many different situations and have worked successfully. Secondly, they have a wide applicability because they can fit almost any subject matter.

TABLE 1: Biographical variables and students' language learning problems.

Criteria	LLLPL (28–56)	MLLPL (57–84)	HLLPL (85–112)
Gender			
Male	0	135	27
Female	18	240	60
Age in years			
18–21	9	201	21
22–25	6	141	54
26–29	6	27	9
30+	0	6	0
Year of study			
First	12	165	18
Second	0	78	30
Third	6	87	27
Fourth	0	45	12
Home language			
English	0	18	9
Afrikaans	0	51	21
Sesotho	18	174	39
IsiXhosa	0	60	6
IsiZulu	0	21	6
Setswana	0	36	0
Sepedi	0	9	0
SiSwati	0	0	6
Other	0	6	0
Faculty			
A	6	84	18
B	6	105	39
C	0	78	12
D	9	105	18

LLLPL, low language learning problem level; MLLPL, moderate language learning problem level; HLLPL, high language learning problem level.

A total of 480 students participated. These were drawn from all the four faculties: A, B, C and D (see Table 1 – Findings) for a complete distribution.

A stratified random sampling design was used to select students as participants for this study. According to Acharya et al.,²⁷ in stratified random sampling, data are divided into various subgroups (strata) showing common characteristics. As the purpose was to draw a manageable stratified sample of 480 students using equal allocation, 120 students were selected from each of the four faculties, resulting in a total sample of 480 student participants. Fox, Hunn and Mathers²⁸ suggest an approximate sample size of 384 in a population of 500 000; therefore, 480 was deemed appropriate for this study. The idea of a sample size is, however, downplayed by Noordzij et al.²⁹ as just an insignificant consideration as the random selection of participants on its own ensures representativeness.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was applied for and granted by the University of the Free State's Ethics Committee (ref. no. UFS-HSD2015/0671). The purpose of the study was explained to the student respondents before the study could be conducted. Participants' rights were explained fully, and all the participants were assured that they would remain anonymous. All sources consulted were acknowledged and referenced accordingly.

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows that there are three groups of students that emerged: (1) a low language learning problem level (LLLPL) group, (2) a moderate language learning problem level (MLLPL) group and (3) a high language learning problem level (HLLPL) group.

The results above show that there were only 3.75% of students in the LLLPL group and that these were all speakers of indigenous languages (without breaking them down into language groups). Amongst those in the MLLPL group, 63.75% were speakers of indigenous languages; 10.63% were Afrikaans-speaking and 3.75% were English-speaking, and amongst those in the HLLPL group, 11.87% were speakers of indigenous languages, 4.38% were Afrikaans-speaking and 1.88% were English-speaking.

These findings confirm that the University of Technology is dominated by black students, with Sesotho being the language of the majority, and that language learning problems vary amongst students who speak indigenous languages. The finding that some students are in the LLLPL group may be because of the support that is provided to those who are L2 speakers of English through the Academic Language Proficiency course that is compulsory to all first-year students. This is possible because academic literacy, which encompasses reading, writing, listening and speaking, has been determined in studies to be a main reason for success or lack of academic success. A study by Van Dyk et al.³⁰ found that many students are inadequately equipped to engage successfully in the academic discourse. Another study by Butler and Van Dyk³¹ had found that tertiary education students struggle to cope with the demands placed on them in terms of reading and writing expectations for coursework. In fact, most of these demands are presented by instruction in a language other than the students' HL.

There may be a misconception that prolonged exposure to a language of instruction may result in the mastery of the language and subsequent disappearance of discomfort presented by it. This, however, does not mean unanimity amongst speakers of other languages, including indigenous languages, that HL is a panacea for all learning challenges either. Alexander³² notes that black people had and continued to mistrust the value of HL education that they associated with tenets of Bantu Education.

By accommodating black students in the English MOI, the institution merely offered them a better alternative to Afrikaans, as most students were not familiar with the language (according to the institution), but this does not fully address the challenges presented by academic instruction in a student's L2. Introducing the majority students' HL as a LoLT would ensure that students enjoy the right to learn in a language that they understand better, on the one hand, and also ensure that the institution complies with the Language Policy Framework for Public Higher Education Institutions,³³ on the other hand. Merely dropping Afrikaans in order to

accommodate black students in the English medium does not do much to resolve language problems at the institution, but merely takes away the right of students who prefer tuition in Afrikaans, a right also enshrined in the Bill of Rights,¹² without addressing the main language issue that the institution is faced with. As seen in the results, 10.63% and 4.38% of Afrikaans-speaking students were in the MLLPL and HLLPL groups, respectively, which shows that the shift in language policy adversely affected them as well. In fact, the existence of Afrikaans as an MOI alongside English presented no challenges to the students for whom it was not compulsory. A better option for the institution would have been to add to the two MOIs (English and Afrikaans) a majority indigenous language to mitigate the learning challenges presented by L2 instruction, especially to the majority of black students, a group that has always been marginalised. Such a change in the institution's language policy would address the real needs of students and ensure that the language of instruction ceases to be a barrier to their learning.

Conclusion

The objectives of the article were to determine students' perspectives on the University of Technology's shift from a dual-medium (English and Afrikaans) language policy to a monolingual (English-only) language policy and to establish whether the shift had any impact on their (students') learning. Although students' perspectives varied to some degree, perhaps, in line with the language learning challenges that they experience, it was found that a monolingual language policy is no solution to the language barrier at the institution. The multilingual nature of the country (although institutions of higher learning also attract students from other countries) needs to be reflected in and accommodated by policies of academic institutions. This would resolve issues of access and success in HE whilst addressing injustice at the same time by ensuring that indigenous languages also have a role to play in the education of the majority of marginalised speakers of these languages who may prefer to learn through them.

Acknowledgements

No other author contributed to the paper.

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contribution

S.A.N. was responsible for the study's conceptualisation, investigation, methodology, project administration and funding. E.M.M. was responsible for the original draft, review and editing.

Funding information

Funding was received from the National Institute for Humanities & Social Sciences (ref. no. SDS14/1053).

Data availability

Data were collected for a bigger project and stored safely. This paper is only part of the project.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in the paper are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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