

Introduction: Language Issues in the Teaching and Learning Domain at some Southern African Universities

Gregory KAMWENDO

University of Zululand, South Africa

and

Thabile MBATHA

University of the Western Cape, South Africa

This special issue of the *Nordic Journal of African Studies* focusses on language issues in the teaching and learning domain in university education in two African countries in southern Africa – Botswana and South Africa. Both countries belong to Kachru's (1986) outer circle of English, and are therefore classified as English-speaking countries. This sociolinguistic label, however, fails to adequately depict the reality on the ground since it is African indigenous languages that serve as the medium of interaction for the vast majority of the peoples of Botswana and South Africa.

The three papers published in this special issue address students' language interactions and how language is used to negotiate learning spaces in two professional programmes at university level. The two professional programmes are social work (Nkateng and Kasule's paper) and teacher education (Mthiyane's and Mbatha's papers). Before we summarize the three papers, it is worthwhile to present the sociolinguistic contexts within which Botswana and South African higher education systems are situated. To begin with, Botswana is a multilingual and multicultural country in which Setswana is the national lingua franca whilst English is the official language (Nyati-Ramahobo 2000). The University of Botswana, the site of the study which is discussed in the special issue, is an English-medium institution (Kamwendo 2011). South Africa has eleven official languages (nine of which are indigenous African languages). South Africa has a language policy document that guides and regulates the higher education sector (Republic of South Africa 2002) and the policy requires higher education institutions to develop and promote the use of indigenous African languages as additional languages of scholarship. This call is part of the transformation process in the post-apartheid era. The possibility and actual experiences of using indigenous African languages as additional languages of scholarship have been documented in the scholarly literature (see, for example, Neethling 2010, Kamwendo et al 2014, Mqquwashu 2014, Nkosi 2014 and others). Despite efforts to intellectualize African indigenous languages and to promote them as additional languages of scholarship, English still dominates in the South African higher education's teaching and learning domain.

We now turn to summaries and brief discussions of each of the three papers appearing in this special issue of the *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. Nkateng and Kasule's paper, "*From university writing to workplace writing: The case of social work graduates at the University of Botswana*", acknowledges that academic writing is important for academic purposes and raises the concern that university education does not adequately prepare students for report writing that is required in the work places of social workers. Moreover, the workplace report writing is conducted in English while at the same time, interactions with the clients largely take place through Setswana. The aim of university education should be to meet both academic needs and the needs of the workplace. The demands of the academic community are not similar to the demands of the workplace.

In the second paper, Nonhlanhla Mthiyane's paper, "*Pre-service teachers' beliefs and experiences surrounding the use of languages in science the classroom: A South African case study*", the focus is on the question of how proficiency in the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is a contributing factor to learners' performance in Science. Mthiyane's findings indicate that non-native users of English as a LoLT find the language to be a barrier to learning and understanding of concepts of science. The paper points out that pre-service teachers develop feelings of inadequacy and lack confidence due to their lack of proficiency in English as a LoLT. English as a medium of learning and teaching is one of the critical factors regulating access to and success in higher education in post-apartheid South Africa among black students who use and speak English as an additional language.

The third and final paper, Thabile Mbatha's "*Ideologies shaping language choices: Voices of African students on isiZulu modules in higher education*" furthers the debate on tertiary students' attitudes towards an African language usage at a university. Mbatha's article was prompted by a comment made by a student who was dissatisfied with having to study part of her degree through her mother tongue (isiZulu). The paper attempts to describe issues of ideology and identity that are formed as a result of language choice. The paper highlights that although the mother tongue has social values such as connectedness, rootedness and belonging, students preferred English. Students were in favour of isiZulu only for certain functions. Mbatha's paper is an example of micro-level language policy (i.e. the selection of isiZulu as an additional medium of teaching and learning), thus responding positively to the macro-level language policy i.e. the language policy of the South African higher education as well as the Constitution which provides for eleven official languages – one of them being isiZulu (Republic of South Africa 2002).

Two important themes emerge from the three papers. The first theme is that of language for academic purposes (English) and language of the workplace (Setswana) for the social worker (see Nkateng and Kasule's paper). The two papers on South Africa touch on the theme of LoLT – a very complicated and complex issue in post-apartheid South Africa. For some students, the use of

English as LoLT is a major obstacle or barrier to meaningful learning (see Mthiyane's paper), but is the use of an African indigenous language (see Mbatha's paper) the solution? The use of African indigenous languages as LoLT comes with some challenges and opportunities. The commonly experienced challenges include the lack of standardized academic terminologies in African languages, the non-availability of teaching and learning materials that are written in African languages, and the negative attitudes people (including mother tongue speakers) have towards African languages. On the brighter side of things, the use of an African language as LoLT contributes to a better understanding of concepts (see also Ndimande-Hlongwa & Wildsmith-Cromarty 2010, Kamwendo et al 2014, Mgqwashu 2014, Nkosi 2014). Despite the advantages of employing an African language as a LoLT, the findings from Botswana and South African higher education institutions under study in this special issue of the *Nordic Journal of African Studies* point to English being the predominantly used LoLT. Whilst English continues to dominate as LoLT in higher education in the two selected countries, there is at least in some South African universities, a bold move to have African languages as LoLT. But such bold moves are very limited in magnitude and number not only in South Africa, but also on the African continent as a whole. To this end, one can say that the linguistic Africanization of the university in Africa is still in its infancy stage (for a detailed account of Africanization of education in Africa, see Msila and Gumbo, 2016).

REFERENCES

Kachru, B. 1986.

The alchemy of English. Urbana: University of Illinois.

Kamwendo, G. H., N. Hlongwa and N. Mkhize 2014.

On medium of instruction and African scholarship: The case of isiZulu at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. **Current Issues in Language Planning**. 15(1): 75–89.

Kamwendo, G. H. 2011.

Internationalization of the language curriculum at the University of Botswana: Current trends. **Journal of Social Development in Africa**. 26(1): 107–133.

Msila, V. and M. T. Gumbo (eds.). 2016.

Africanising the curriculum: Indigenous perspectives and theories. The Sun Press.

Mgqwashu, E. 2014.

On developing academic literacy in the mother tongue for epistemological access: The role of isiZulu as the LoLT in a South African university. **Current Issues in Language Planning**. 15(1): 90–103.

- Ndimande-Hlongwa, N. and R. Wildsmith-Cromarty (eds.) 2010.
Multilingualism for access, language development and language intellectualisation. Special issue of **Alternation** 17(1).
- Neethling, B. 2010.
Xhosa as medium of instruction in higher education: Pie in the sky?
Per Linguam 26(1): 61–73
- Nkosi, Z. 2014.
Postgraduate students' experiences and attitudes towards isiZulu as a medium of instruction at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. **Current Issues in Language Planning** 15(3): 245–264.
- Nyati-Ramahobo, N. 2000.
The language situation in Botswana. **Current Issues in Language Planning** 1(2): 243–300.
- Republic of South Africa 2002.
Language policy for higher education. Pretoria: Ministry of Education.