UNIT 5

TAU FINAL REPORT: July 2016

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Project title: Biliteracy development of summary writing skills in Communication among first-year university students

Background

This project which centres around the issues of medium of instruction was motivated by the Language Policy for Higher Education (LPHE) that was promulgated by the Department of Education (DoE) in 2002. The LPHE is apt because in the matter of medium of instruction it identifies "the current position of English and Afrikaans as the dominant languages of instruction" (15.1) as "a barrier to access and success in higher education" (5.) because "the majority of [African] students entering higher education are not fully proficient in English and Afrikaans" (5.). For this reason, the LPHE encourages the "development, in the medium to long-term, of South African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education, alongside English and Afrikaans" (21.). This is to be done such that black African languages are developed at higher education institutions (HEIs) for use as languages of learning and teaching.

As the first step towards achieving the goals of the LPHE, each HEI was instructed to formulate and publish its own language policy that will promote multilingualism. In response to this policy directive, many HEIs in South Africa have since 2003 developed multilingual education policies. In the same vein, the university that forms the context of this study developed its first language policy in 2003. In the policy the institution gave recognition to isiZulu, together with English and Afrikaans, as a regional language worth developing for academic purposes. However, more than ten years later the policy has never been implemented. This has happened despite the fact that the institution, like many others, has throughout the years been experiencing similar academic problems that gave rise to the LPHE. It has been found that it is the majority of black African citizens who do not experience academic success in school and university levels as evident in the astronomically high failure and dropout rates (CHE 2013; Higher Education Monitor, 2010; Nkosi, 2011; Webb, 2007; 2013). The CHE (2013:15) reports that "about one in four students graduate in regulation time of their qualification" and more concerning is an estimated 55% of the student intake that will never graduate.

Part of the reason why the LPHE lacks implementation has been attributed to the fact that many African-language-speaking stakeholders do not support the idea of using black African languages in education. This is largely because of the view that English comes with prestige and privileges. Ndimande-Hlongwa (2009: 157) laments this thinking when she states that:

> Kukhona okungahambi kahle okudala isimo sokuthi izilimi zomdabu

Zibonakale zingabalulekile emfundweni, entuthukweni kazwelonke kanjalo nase ntandweni yeningi.

There is something fundamentally wrong that leads to the perception that indigenous African languages are not important in education, national development and democracy. [my translation]

In an effort to be a harbinger of change, the project sought to find a way in which it could contribute towards the change of such perceptions. It was hoped that in the long run the change would contribute to the implementation of language policies that promote the use of African languages in education.

Aim

It is, first and foremost, recognised that English is the most desired language among black Africans because of its perceived social and economic value. It is however noted that the language does not seem to work towards improving the academic performance of African students. In an effort to find a balance between English and African languages the project borrowed from one of the aims of bilingual education which is to promote biliteracy.

The concept of biliteracy, also referred to as translanguaging, informs an approach in which two languages are used within education. Biliteracy allows learners to be engaged in activities "in which communication takes place in two (or more) languages around a written text" (Street 2011: 60). Similarly, the term translanguaging refers to an educational process that allows learners the opportunity to develop their ability to shuttle between languages or language varieties (Hornberger and Link 2012: 242). This is whereby learners read a text in L2 and then summarise it in either L1 or both L1 and L2. This approach is closely related to commonly used terms known as translation and interpretation which equally involve a reformulation of a message presented in one language into another (Cervantes-Kelly 2010: 61).

The project was undertaken as part of instruction in academic literacy among first-year students at a University of Technology. The focus area of instruction was the reading and summary writing skills in two languages, IsiZulu (L1) and English (L2). This was considered a valuable skill to develop for a future workforce within a bi/multilingual South African society.

In the light of this understanding, the project aims were to:

- Provide and engage participants with texts that are in L1 and L2 to summarise across the two languages of the project; and
- Investigate the participants' perceptions on the use of L1 and L2 in the Communication in English course.

Methodology

The method followed in realising the above aims entailed the following:

- Activities in summarizing across two languages.
- Investigation of activities' impact on attitudes towards the role of L1 in education using a developed questionnaire.

Outcomes

The project was undertaken as intended and the following are an indication of its outcomes:

Conferences and potential Publications

- The Fourth European Conference on Language Learning 2016, United Kingdom 29 June-3 July 2016
  Conference paper: Sociocultural aspects and their influence on attitudes towards biliteracy.
  Funding: National Research Foundation SA-UK mobility grant of R30 000 was received with additional funding obtained from MUT.

  Publication: Book chapter: Interdisciplinary themes and perspectives in African language research in the 21st century,
  Chapter title: Sociocultural aspects and their impact on attitudes toward academic biliteracy development.
  Publication date between November 2016 – early 2017. (Under review)

- 3rd International Conference on Language and Literacy Education 12--14 August 2016, Wits School of Education, Johannesburg.
  Submitted abstract: Translanguaging in summarizing skills: The need to develop biliterate bilinguals

  Paper to be submitted for publication consideration in The Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies (SALALS) journal for Volume 34(3), 2016.

  Funding for conference attendance (travel, accommodation & car hire) was secured from the MUTs Teaching Development Grant. TAU funds were used for the conference registration fee of R1 500.