

## Multilingualism in Higher Education versus Facilitators' Professional Language Competencies in South Africa

Nande C. K. Neeta

*Department of English, University of Venda, South Africa  
E-mail: nande.neeta@univen.ac.za*

**KEYWORDS** Socio-cultural Theory. Discourse. Apprenticeship. Community Of Practice

**ABSTRACT** The purpose of this article is to highlight the critical importance of facilitators' (professors, lecturers and tutors) professional language competencies for multilingualism in higher education to work effectively. It is through facilitator use of appropriate language (discourse) that concepts are unraveled for students to learn and to build representational structures that constitute the basis for understanding unfamiliar subject matter, and for self-expression. The competencies ultimately influence the outcome of multilingual higher education, as it is dependent on skillful relevant professional language scaffolding of student learning and for designing of coursework materials for both linguistic and academic proficiency. The combination of discourse and professional language facilitation embed the recognition that students' linguistic and academic development is intentional and shaped by the sociocultural system across time. The researcher concludes that facilitators need to be appropriately and explicitly 'apprenticed' and socialized in professional language knowledge so that students can appropriate relevant discourse necessary for both academic and real world expression.

### INTRODUCTION

According to (Chabata 2013), one of the objectives of multilingualism for higher education is to facilitate students' use of their varied linguistic repertoires so that they can benefit from global knowledge and research, while simultaneously remaining responsive to the country's social justice, economic and cultural needs. This is only achievable through quality education, which entails student performance through what they learn, and how they learn coupled with facilitator competence. In this connection, scholars (Grosser and Nel 2013; Nel and Muller 2013; Siyepu 2013) have alluded to the poor quality of South African facilitators generally and the under-preparedness of students entering university. Kulshrestha and Pandey (2013) highlight the importance of the link between facilitators' professional knowledge competencies and students' performance for both academic success and life-long learning. In order to meet the imperatives of multilingualism for higher education, facilitators ought to have both language and subject knowledge abilities. This is because facilitators' role is to assist students in overcoming difficulties specific to the linguistic and academic aspects of language use in multilingual higher education while creating learning/teaching environments for students to be creative and innovative in the application of knowledge.

Multilingualism in higher education carries the understanding that education is a process of 'sense-making'. That is, going beyond mere acquisition of subject knowledge by students, to include an ability to bring together disparate knowledge and information in solving real-life problems. Since students are at the receiving end of the language outputs of facilitators, facilitator discourse is without doubt, a powerful tool for and an indisputable factor in shaping students' levels of academic and linguistic competency. Rural South African multilingualism for higher education entails the use of, and knowledge transfer in more than one language. This means higher education facilitators need to become increasingly skilled in helping students to use their full and varied linguistic repertoires to make sense of what they are learning in order to be asserts to themselves, their communities and the country. Therefore, the theoretical framework that follows justifies the need for developing the professional language competencies of facilitators for rural South African higher education.

### THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Siyepu (2013), socio-cultural theory perspectives on facilitator training, teaching and learning revolve around the concept of learning as situated social practice, which embraces mediation, discourse and social interac-

tion. He argues that the cognitive development of students depends on “apprenticeship” learning or “social” learning which is spearheaded by the more “knowledgeable other” (teachers and facilitators), who have higher understanding and abilities than the students. It is within the academic ambit that shared engagement between facilitator and student is mediated through an appropriate curriculum, texts and tools. These mediating resources have a perceived authority that is expressed through discourse. Talbot (2007: 9) defines discourse as ‘the process of interaction itself: a cultural activity.’ This is why discourse models do not exist in individual minds, but are shared across people, books, other media and various political practices for Siyepu (2013) maintains that both physical and technical learning tools have a historical background. As such, discourse development and continuity is ensured by the structures of communication that students learn and use in context. Hence, in the context of this discussion, it is what facilitators and students are exposed to and make use of in multilingual higher education.

Therefore, the application of socio-cultural perspectives for rural multilingualism in higher education, demands that facilitators serve as master craftsmen (and women) to whom the student is “apprenticed” in accordance with the notion of scaffolding through time. Scaffolding is the term given to the provision of appropriate assistance to students, which is fore-grounded in facilitators who are competent enough to provide appropriate input by providing contextual support for meaning by the use of simplified language and /or modelling. The scaffold generates interaction between facilitator and facilitator, facilitator and student, which enables the student to make connections to the new experience, and to prior knowledge and experience (Siyepu 2013). This kind of interaction is critical, as mediated agency is not limited to a single discipline but permeates all disciplines and this is the reason for facilitators’ need for both academic and linguistic dexterity for multilingualism in higher education to succeed. Nel and Muller (2013) highlight the negative effect of the limited English proficiency levels of some academics, which influence their students’ English language expression and academic achievement. Alexander (2012), states that in South Africa generally, the language competence that is required for effective academic performance is lacking in both English and mother

tongues. So students acquire neither academic English nor academic mother tongue.

### **FACILITATOR CHALLENGES OF RURAL MULTILINGUAL HIGHER EDUCATION**

Nel and Muller (2013; Siyepu (2013); and earlier, Uys et al. (2007: 77) argue that one of the most important factors impacting negatively on the improvement of academic literacy in South Africa is effective training in English for content discipline facilitators. In addition, (Grosser and Nel 2013; Siyepu 2013) have pointed out the under-preparedness of the South African first year university students, which they attribute to the poor quality of teaching. Universities inherit the unprepared students, who lack both academic and linguistic proficiency that is traced back to under qualified or unqualified facilitators, which results in poor teaching both in second language (English) and in indigenous African languages. Facilitators are poor in subject knowledge and language instruction. It is noteworthy that currently, content discipline facilitators at the University of Venda expect students to write assignments and generally demonstrate what they know through the medium of English. Yet, these facilitators do not pay systematic attention to the discourse use for the benefit of the students. This is because these facilitators lack the background training to do so and are thus indifferent to the fact that they have a responsibility to meet the second language related needs of the students. Content discipline facilitators perceive second language matters as the responsibility of the department of English and they do not consider themselves as being required to teach the language and specific discourses of their disciplines. This is the reason for the rote learning and the regurgitation of unmediated knowledge and information that is widely observed in students’ written work: they fail to take full control of their learning due to the facilitators’ own limited language competence. One can safely state that the practice of content and language-integrated instruction is virtually non-existent in rural South African higher education.

Since multilingualism for higher education includes the use of indigenous African languages (mother tongues) in teaching and learning, Chabata (2013) has argued that standardisation of African languages is one of the major chal-

lenges for rural multilingualism in higher education. It entails the development of the standard variety of African languages so that they can have academic speech forms and vocabulary necessary at the relevant levels as these forms are not the currency of these languages. In this sense, codification of facilitators' knowledge and their work has to be the first step for African languages facilitator training for specialized knowledge holds the key to the entrenchment of the academic disciplinary status of these languages. There is agreement among Kulshrestha and Pandey (2013), Grosser and Nel (2013), Nel and Muller (2013), Siyepu (2013), that the form of facilitator knowledge can both shape and constrain what facilitators are able to do in context. Therefore, positively improved training for them would contribute to their knowledge base and competence levels for English, African languages and content disciplines for multilingualism in higher education. For facilitators to have a sense of the appropriate strategies to support their students effectively, they have to have the appropriate professional language competencies to be able to be in step with the language demands of, and discourse required by the content they are teaching.

According to Borg (2011), facilitators' prior experiences, as students, and as trainees, have a significant influence on their "cognition" (what they think, know and believe) and this continues to have an impact on their cognition and to shape their professional lives as facilitators. Thus rural higher education facilitators are caught in a vicious cycle of teaching in the way they themselves were taught and trained or not as facilitators. The effect of this cycle manifests itself in the recycling of the same shortcomings in the professional linguistic base, skills as well as academic proficiency of facilitators throughout the education system including higher education. Any efforts directed at adding value to the quality of rural multilingualism in higher education has to seriously take stock of the sociocultural underpinnings of the languages acquired and used by facilitators and students at all levels of education.

#### **IMPACT OF FACILITATOR COMPETENCE ON RURAL HIGHER EDUCATION**

There is agreement among scholars (Grosser and Nel 2013; Kulshrestha and Pandey 2013;

Nel and Muller 2013; Siyepu 2013) that practical knowledge base for effective language and content teaching constitute the intellectual resources that the facilitator brings into the lecture hall or tutorial. Facilitators' language awareness should be 'metacognitive' because it involves their ability to be reflective in terms of their knowledge of and about language, and this awareness affects their practice in context. This knowledge enables facilitators to be flexible and creative and is indicative of the facilitator's particular professional knowledge and skills, which enables him or her to act professionally in a wide variety of professional situations. Facilitators gain their professional competence from apprenticeships that involve observation, teaching experience, and education experience that include language courses. All these contribute to the facilitator's cognition (Nel and Muller 2013). This is the reason for the need for higher education facilitators to be both proficient users and skilled analysts of the language they are using to be able to impart subject knowledge to their students. Language content competence include the facilitator's ability to speak, read, write and understand as a competent user of a language and also being able to analyze the language's pragmatic realizations and literacy conventions.

Furthermore, facilitators' professional competence is crucial in the designing of course units collaboratively to scaffold both subject content and language development as multilingualism in higher education potentially provides the ideal site for collaborative work. This collaborative effort, which can only be undertaken by professionally competent facilitators can result in well thought out units of work that effectively scaffold both students' grasp of content and language, and subject specific discourse for the process involves the systematic relation of discourse to context. When professionally competent language and content facilitators work together, instead of seeing themselves as dispensers of formal declarative knowledge, their endeavor is a pedagogical design problem overarching the ultimate objective of a task of selecting content within a course.

In the context of facilitators' professional language competence, scaffolding for rural higher education multilingualism offers opportunities for optimising fruitful interaction and communication among concerned members of a community of practice, and it is the facilitator's professional competence that influences his or her

decision concerning the forms of her or his input for instructing students. Grosser and Nel (2013), Nel and Muller (2013), Siyepu (2013), acknowledge the fact that the form and structure of discourse input constitutes what the student is exposed to in the context of his or her educational career. When the level of facilitators' own subject and language competence is questionable and of an unacceptable standard for use in context, this poor usage and knowledge is transferred to the students. In this regard, facilitator discourse should not contain incorrect grammar, lexical and discourse errors, as the discourse is readily available for appropriation by the students. Hence, facilitators' professional competencies have a significant effect on the discourse competence and academic agility of their students. This means facilitators need to be competent to comment explicitly on the forms, structures and functions of the language being used to convey the content, concepts and meaning.

When facilitator discourse is replete with incorrect forms, it does not augur well for the outcome and quality of rural multilingualism for higher education. Nel and Muller (2013) have identified substantial similarities between the language written forms of facilitators and those of their students. In other words, theoretically and in practice, facilitators are responsible for both adequate language and content input due to their language and academic proficiency. Thus modeling becomes effective when carried out by professionally competent facilitators, who, for example, are able to point out to the students, the underlying patterning recognized by the community of practice to which the student is being apprenticed, which could be English, or in the specific discourse of a content subject. Therefore, some facilitators in rural higher education are delivering both inadequate language inputs and inadequate subject content due to their own limited linguistic and academic proficiency. But for the South African multilingualism in higher education to succeed, the professional competencies base of facilitators needs to be acknowledged and given upliftment to facilitate incremental teaching and learning.

### CONCLUSION

I conclude by stating that trainee facilitators need deliberate guidance to focus on the features of academic language that help them in

recognizing and in producing the correct patterns, the patterns that are shared by the community of practice to which they are being "apprenticed." As professional identity refers to a facilitator's knowledge of his or her academic field, identity calls for a specific career role and this means a facilitator's identity requires the appropriation of professional language competence. In this connection, facilitator identity and professional competence are inseparable because knowledge is viewed as the 'ability to use-in-practice'. Hence, facilitator learning and training for rural multilingualism in higher education is a form of necessary socialization for facilitators and students to be able to meet the challenges of a globalised knowledge economy, as well as meeting the country's social, cultural and political needs. Meeting the higher education needs of rural multilingualism requires facilitators to be prepared to take on constantly changing responsibilities, which involve teamwork and networking, and which require constant reflection and introspection. Every higher education facilitator needs to be an academic language development practitioner because of the pervasiveness of language across disciplines. Implicit in this is the need for facilitators to move towards a deliberate collegiate position and attitude to facilitate effective teaching and learning. It is a given that it is only through competent facilitators that rural multilingual South African higher education can compete at par or at an advantage on the global knowledge economy for the country's sustainable economic and social development.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommends that in addition to improved facilitator training and development, there should be research directed at academics' discourse practices in context as well as at the manner in which the South African multilingualism for higher education literacies can be affected. Language facilitation for multilingual higher education should become a collaborative effort as currently training of facilitators in different languages takes place in isolation.

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