

## Transforming Higher Education Through Mother Tongue Teaching: A Case Study of One South African University

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**ABSTRACT** This paper reports on how one South African university has responded to a call for transformation in Higher Education by formulating a language policy that emphasizes the use of an African language as the medium of instruction. This was a qualitative study located within the interpretive paradigm. Methods used in the study included reflections and literature review. The objectives of the study were threefold, that is, to understand how University X understands transformation, to establish how this University has responded to transformation, and to explore the extent to which University X has succeeded in implementing the mother tongue policy as a way of responding to transformation. Results indicate that the language policy is being implemented with some success. It also shows that there are negative attitudes towards this move as well as serious challenges that require human resource and materials development, which have financial implications. The paper acknowledges the need to extend the debate to include different stakeholders and to develop strategies to increase the participants' awareness of the importance of teaching in the mother tongue in institutions of higher learning.

### INTRODUCTION

In modern societies, higher education (HE) occupies a central role in the cultural, economic and social development. In South Africa, with the history of discrimination based on all kinds of differences (disability, gender, language, race), higher education has a critical role to play in redressing the imbalances of the past and in supporting the social transformation process by creating and responding to new opportunities (Department of Education 1997). The involvement of HE in transformation is in line with the economic, political and social shifts to democracy taking place within the country (Fourie 1999). In addition, the South African constitution promotes the achievement of equality, human rights, freedom, human dignity and values that challenge one to build a humane and caring society for all (DoE 2001). Therefore, universities are expected to champion the transformation process by responding to various aspects of transformation, thereby, preparing students to take the transformation agenda to their communities and beyond.

University X is one of four in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. It is ranked amongst the top performing institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Like other universities, it has been affected by the transformation. The Education White Paper 3 (DoE 1997) views the transforma-

tion of higher education as a part of the national process of economic, political and social changes that seek to bring about equity. In this paper the researchers reflect on the transformation process at University X, particularly on how it has engaged with language as a means to transform.

### Why Transformation?

South Africa's transition from apartheid and minority rule to democracy requires that all existing practices, institutions and values are viewed anew and rethought in terms of their fitness for the new era (DoE 1997). The drive to transform higher education seems to be global and is in sync with the major changes taking place in the world (Fourie 1999). At a local level, HE has been characterized by unequal opportunities and/or access based on race, class, and gender, as well as lack of fit between the country's economic needs and the graduates' competencies (DoE 1997). Therefore, its transformation fits in with the country's transformation process to democracy and is a necessary process if the country is to meet the challenges of a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist society that is committed to creating a better life for all (DoE 1997). The transformation of higher education institutions has also been necessitated by new demands and/or challenges that result from admitting more students from previously disadvan-

taged backgrounds. Fourie describes this as 'greater responsiveness' to the needs of the communities that they serve (1999: 284).

As such, transformation is a vehicle for addressing the learning and development needs of all communities, facilitating the development of an "enlightened, responsible and constructively critical" citizenry capable of generating, sharing and appraising knowledge (DoE 1997: 4). Without transformation, HE will not be able to contribute to skills development (human resource development, high-level skills training and the creation, attainment and application of new knowledge), which is a priority if South Africa is to be a role player in the global economy (DoE 1997: 6).

#### **What Does Transformation Mean for Universities?**

Fourie (1999: 277) defines transformation as a process that alters the form, shape, and even the nature of institutions, something much deeper than cosmetic changes or window dressing. Others have defined it as the process of:

*...redressing the historical inequalities that were built into the educational dispensations under apartheid and promoting the commitment of institutions to a new social order, which reflects the social structure more accurately.* (Chand and Misra 1999: 1)

In other words, transformation is bigger than change as it involves the creation of something that is totally new, a paradigm shift that takes place at two levels, that is, the personal and organizational level (Daszko and Sheinberg 2005). It is a "radical revision, a transformation of the whole mental process... A mind transplant" (Daszko and Sheinberg 2005:1). In the South African context, this process is governed by the principles of academic freedom, democracy, development, effectiveness/efficiency, equity and redress, institutional independence, public accountability, and quality (DoE 1997: 7-9).

The transformation process goes beyond changes in course contents, governance structures, staff and students' composition but includes what Fourie (1999: 277) refers to as "the transformation of the organizational culture and the development and acceptance of new, shared values.", which she adds, is only possible when there is a paradigm shift, an essential adjustment in mindsets of stakeholders. It has been

argued that the process of transforming universities, including South African ones, has brought to the fore the following issues: curriculum restructuring, democratization of institutional governance, more access for educationally and financially disadvantaged students, realignment of research focus and community service, and the redress of gender and race inequalities (Fourie 1999: 279), and all this has implications for the academic staff. Naledi Pandor, the Minister of Home Affairs who was the acting president of the Republic at the time when she delivered the sixth annual Imam Haron Memorial Lecture in Cape Towns, stated, "*We need to examine university curricula and even content to create the basis for graduates who are widely read, global and local in perspective, oriented toward humane principles and yet filled with the ambition to succeed for the good of all*" (Pandor 2013).

Increased access for previously disadvantaged students and the redress of racial inequalities cannot be effected without some reconsideration of the curriculum, particularly the language of teaching and learning (LoLT) and the role it continues to play in excluding the less powerful. For example, many learners in South Africa (from the school level right up to tertiary level) continue to learn in a second or even third languages although this has unfavorable consequences on their academic performance. As a result, many often require some form of support to help them adjust and adapt to university demands. The status quo will continue unless serious measures are taken to develop local languages as languages of learning and teaching.

According to Pandor (2006), the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have responded positively to the appeal of developing and revising their institutional language policies to align them with the Constitution. HEIs were to identify an indigenous African language of choice for initial development as a medium of instruction (Govender 2009). The University of Limpopo is a leading example in teaching through the medium of instruction of an African language. Most studies maintain that higher education institutions focus on issues like employment equity, curriculum change, governance, staff development, and diversity (Fourie 1999). However, for some, focus has been on the renaming of buildings, drawing on African symbols, the appointment of women and black people to leadership posi-

tions, improvement of equity and social divisions as well as changes in language policies (Thaver 2009; Hugo 1998).

Language policies for education are always highly charged matters. Hartshorne (1995) seems to attest to this fact in his observation that in multilingual and bilingual countries the situation becomes even more complicated. He cites the examples of bilingual countries such as Canada, Belgium, African countries south of the Sahara, and even the United States of America. In the South African context, language in education issues has always been associated with “political dominance, the protection of power structures, the preservation of privilege and the distribution of economic resources” (Hartshorne 1995:307). The use of English and Afrikaans as languages of instruction in South African schools, and as languages of learning and teaching (LoLT) in all Higher Education Institutions has not been divorced from such influences. Commenting on the use of English as the language of tuition at universities, Alexander (2006) observes that universities often reflect the ‘image and the likeness of a dominant political power or cultural authority’. He further explains that this seemingly “regular pattern” for the universities can be traced back to the time of the Roman Empire where the language of the dominant powers like French and German became the languages of tuition in higher education for the emerging nations whose own languages were in the process of standardization and modernization.

Such has been the case in South Africa but with the dawn of independence in 1994, there has been a need to revisit the languages issues. People want liberation, so to speak, from the languages which were imposed on them by a colonial system. One of the primary strategies used to ensure language change in South Africa has been to ensure equity of all South African languages through an inclusive constitution. The South African constitution (Act No.8 108 of 1996) advocates for equal treatment of all South African languages. This implies a heightened status and use of previously marginalized indigenous languages. One of the important provisions contained in the Act is that the government must take legislative and other measures to regulate and monitor the use of official languages. However, evidence suggests that in many post-colonial contexts there exists a gap

between policy and practice. The changes advocated by the constitution remain unrealized in the educational context. It is business as usual with the education system continuing with its inherited practice or what Pennycrooke (1992) cited in Heugh (2002: 188) calls ‘postcolonial performativity’.

According to Cole (2003), provincial governments have the authority to develop their own language policy within the provisions of the national language framework. Provincial language policy is essential as it is at this level of government that a number of core government services are delivered. These include education, health, and social development services. Statistics often reflect that in most provinces, there is widespread use of the two former official languages that is, Afrikaans and English, plus the predominant indigenous African language of that province. Of course, the case is likely to be different in a cosmopolitan province such as Gauteng with its different demographics.

South Africa’s Language in Education Policy (LIEP) falls within the overall national language policy framework. The *Higher Education Act* (1997) informs language policy for higher education. Under the Higher Education Act (2002) and subject to the policy determined by the minister of National Education, each higher education institution must determine its language policy. Some of the goals of LIEP include the promotion of multilingualism as well as full participation in society and the economy through equitable and meaningful access to education. It is within this context that the university under study committed to transforming its language policy in 2006. The university’s new language policy calls for additive bilingualism in English and isiZulu while supporting multilingualism more broadly with respect to Afrikaans, the Indian heritage languages, and languages of strategic importance to Africa and globally. Given the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s vision of being the premier university of African scholarship as well as its mission statement, which states among its objectives redressing the disadvantages and the imbalances of the past multilingualism seems to be an important strategy in realization of the university’s goal. Such an objective is also in line with the Ministerial Task Team’s Report for the use of Indigenous Languages as a Medium of Instruction in Higher Education (2004).

The university's language policy describes domains and mechanisms that will be used to facilitate further development of isiZulu as a language of learning and teaching, administration, and communication. Some of the initiatives would include the offering of conversational and other communicative courses such as translation and interpreting services. The policy has identified the use of IsiZulu as particularly relevant in some of the professions in the humanities. The University of KwaZulu-Natal prides itself as the premier university in African research and scholarship, which again highlights the importance of the use of isiZulu in conducting research and disseminating new knowledge since isiZulu remains the main language of communication for many urban and rural communities in the province.

Balfour (2006) asserts that language lies at the heart of education transformation. Language issues in South Africa have always been associated with power relations. The 2001 CHE reports suggests that one of the chief contributing factors in the unacceptably low pass rate at tertiary institutions could be language related. This is a point that Dalvit et al. (2009) further take up in their argument for the use of African languages as LoLT. They argue that the current high dropout rate (above 70%) in primary and secondary schools in the township and rural areas could be partly blamed on language issues.

### **Implications of Transformation**

Generally, transformation does not take place smoothly, change brings about some controversies. If change is to be implemented, one has to expect issues of resistance. To some institution where change has taken place, there are reports which give a clear picture of some denial of other parties. Studies bear evidence that in HEI where the language policy was implemented, staff displayed negative attitudes towards teaching through the medium of instruction of an African language. For example, Govender (2009) asserts that staff members at the Limpopo University threatened sustainability of the degree that was launched. Mbatha (2009) in Govender (2009) states that students displayed mixed emotions regarding the use of African Languages as LoLT. These reports are confirmed by Fourie (1999) who maintains that the effect of transformation is experienced negatively by many aca-

dem staff members. In some HEIs, senates have been criticized for lack of interest in their senate duties during the transformation process (Fourie 1999). Another concern of other HEIs is that due to the admission of high numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, functioning of these institutions has become difficult (ibid). While HEIs are in the process of transformation can result in unbalanced power relations that can lead to stress, conflict and adversarial behavior within HEIs (Taylor 2006).

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

Two frameworks underpinned this study. The study utilized the theory of transformation as a framework. Transformation entails an intense change in structure such that something new is created. Transformation is a vision, "a journey into the unknown" motivated by a desire to learn and to act based on the new learning (Daszko and Sheinberg 2005: 1). A theory of transformation is concerned with the method for transformation, "a system of continual questioning, challenging, exploration, discovery, evaluation..." (Daszko and Sheinberg 2005: 4). This is about the acquisition of new knowledge and acting on the basis of the newly gained insights

The concept of re-culturing was also used as a conceptual framework for this study. Re-culturing is concerned with the development of a new culture within organizations (Ntombela 2009). She adds that the process of re-culturing takes place when institutions of learning "change their vision, committing to new sets of collective values...and become learning organizations where individual and collective learning is enhanced" (Ntombela 2009: 116). This is a paradigm shift propelled by a change in focus from education to learning, from exclusion to inclusion. Both transformation and re-culturing are never ending journeys, driven by a desire to improve conditions. The journey never ends because the state of perfection is an illusion, it does not exist, and because culture, by nature, is not static.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This was a qualitative study located within the interpretive paradigm. Data collection instruments largely included a desktop review of University X and national policy documents and

literature relevant to this study. The researcher is a lecturer in HEI, directly involved in mother tongue teaching. The researcher thus, used reflection on personal experiences as an additional data collection method and this ensured triangulation. Data generated was analyzed in different ways. Personal experiences were listed, and compressed into categories, which led to the emergence of two definite themes: challenges and opportunities of transformation through language. Policy documents were analyzed to understand how the university understands transformation and to establish how policy information informs practice. This was juxtaposed with the experiences of the researcher who is also an academic in the HEI. Data was analyzed using the descriptive analysis technique as discussed by McMillan and Schumacher (1993:486). Three of the four steps towards data reduction and display were used and the steps were as follows. In Step 1, the researcher started by writing the reflections and reading the reflections in conjunction with documents on transformation to identify links. Then the ideas that came to mind as the researcher read the reflections as well as the documents were written. Step 2 was about identifying the topics, which emerged from the data. A topic is the descriptive name for the subject matter of a piece of text as McMillan and Schumacher (1993) explain. Then focus was paid to step 3, which was about classification and categorization of data. Classification means putting similar issues together.

### Research Questions

This paper seeks to answer three questions:

1. How does University X understand transformation?
2. How has University X responded to transformation?
3. To what extent has University X succeeded in implementing mother tongue policy as a way of responding transformation?

## FINDINGS

### 1. University X's Understanding of Transformation

The university understands transformation as the change that takes place in order to accommodate those that were historically disad-

vantaged. The areas of transformation that the university focuses on are equity, and diversity among other things. With regard to equity there are policies that are put in place and are being implemented. The equity office has been arranged to coordinate the development of employment equity. This is done according to the Department of Labor and the office submits reports on issues of equity to this department. There is also the issue of diversity, which the university views under a serious light. A policy on diversity covers issues such as gender, disability, race, harassment, corporative culture and governance. These policies are meant to transform the university and they are being implemented, though not completely.

Multilingualism is also the niche area of the university. In order to transform, the language policy was developed in 2004 and was approved by the council in 2006. The focus of this paper is on the implementation of the University X language policy as one of the issues of transformation at University X. The language policy of 2006 at this university states that there is a need to develop and promote proficiency in indigenous languages in students. This will benefit students in communicating with the majority of the population. This will afford staff and students the opportunity to interact with the community when conducting research, students when and lecturers when teaching and learning. IsiZulu language is chosen as the medium of instruction since it is widely spoken in the province. The policy states that isiZulu will be used for teaching and learning and for research purpose. The fields that are recommended for the development of isiZulu across the university are education, psychology, nursing, law and commerce.

### 2. University X's Response to Transformation: The Issue of Language

University X has developed and approved a language policy in response to the need for transformation. This policy is informed by the Language Policy Framework for South African Higher Education (LPFSAHE) of 2001. This framework stresses the importance of multilingualism in South Africa, taking cognizance of the fact that universities should prepare their graduates for the needs of the country. This framework stresses the development of African Languages.

As such, this institution is implementing this policy in spite of the challenges. To promote the use of isiZulu as the LoLT, the Faculty of Education Studies has decided to offer students registered for the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) the option to do two modules, Literacy and Life Skills in either English or isiZulu. The mode of delivery of these modules is through contact sessions where students engage in class discussions, presentations, projects, class tests and examination at the end of the year.

In addition to that, University X participated in the 'South Africa-Norway Tertiary Education Development Program' (SANTED), which focused on offering short courses of conversational isiZulu to staff and students who are non-speakers of isiZulu (Masikhulume program). The aim of the Masikhulume Program in the Faculty of Education Studies was to enable staff and students to communicate with their colleagues and children in schools when they go out to teach.

### **3. Implications of the Language Policy**

The researcher was deeply involved in mother tongue teaching at this institution, and her reflections showed that there are positives and negatives of using isiZulu as LoLT. Thus, she categorized her experiences into opportunities or strengths and challenges or threats.

#### **Opportunities or Strength**

##### ***Increased Student Participation***

The biggest strength identified is that the students' participation during class discussions is high. Students tend to express themselves freely, and the discussions were lively showing characteristics of a social group under a relaxed atmosphere. There seemed to be vibrant discussions because everyone had something to say. Even students who did not participate when two groups were combined and taught in English, took this opportunity to participate. There was no tension because they were learning in the comfort of their language. According to the comments of students after the teaching practicum, learners in schools also participated very well. Parental involvement was high as parents were able to help learners with homework because it

was given in the language they understand. Students were, however, concerned that the learners' enthusiasm made it difficult to conclude lessons on time because the learners become too talkative.

#### ***New Knowledge***

Mother tongue teaching seemed to be an enriching experience as students and academics gained new knowledge and learnt new concepts that are not used in daily conversations. For example, words like '*isikhahlamezi*' for fax machine and '*Incazelojikelele*', which is an overview. Through teaching in the mother tongue the vocabulary of all participants in the program improved. In addition, the project SANTED worked on the translation of terms for academic learning and for school practice, which brought benefits to the whole institution.

#### ***Students' Performance in Given Activities***

The 2008 and 2009 cohorts did very well in all activities, including the examination as reflected in the class schedules. However, this was achieved at the cost of large quantities of work to be marked as students produced large volumes in projects and tests as they were writing in the mother tongue. Had the module been offered in English, this would not have been the case.

#### ***Colloquium***

As a result of using isiZulu as the LoLT, the School of Education Studies, the Early Childhood Development Unit hosted the colloquium on 'Mother tongue teaching in the early years', which was attended by stakeholders from different educational contexts, those in support of teaching in isiZulu as well those against the practice. Constructive ideas were shared in that colloquium and good suggestions for the way forward were made.

#### **Challenges**

##### ***Attitude***

The big challenge faced was the negative attitudes when the issue of using isiZulu as LoLT was introduced to students, as some were not

willing to learn through the medium of isiZulu. Most students who were negative were those who went to ex-model C schools (multiracial schools) and were good in English but had limited knowledge of written isiZulu. The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) of 1997 had to be brought to their attention, and it was explained that the practice is for the benefit of the learners these students will be teaching. However, those who went to disadvantaged schools and were not fluent in English were happy to learn in a language they had mastered.

What was surprising was that in some schools, the teachers were not happy about the teaching of Life Skills in isiZulu by pre-service teachers. The feeling was that learners do not understand some words in isiZulu, therefore whatever the students taught would have to be re-taught. According to those teachers, this exercise was a waste of time.

### *Terminology*

IsiZulu, like other indigenous languages, has not kept up with the Afrikaans and English languages in terms of development. As a result, there are many words which do not have corresponding concepts in isiZulu. This created instructional challenges as the School in question implemented this policy. In response to this challenge, code switching was adopted. Another challenge with concepts was that some words that refer to parts of the body are not used in public in isiZulu but are labeled as taboo. This creates problems when teaching Life Skills as learners have to learn the proper names of body parts. In English it is easy to call these parts by their names whereas in isiZulu it is regarded as being disrespectful. For example, a vagina can be referred to as 'cake', 'cow', 'rabbit', 'mouse', or 'cigarette' and a penis as a 'stick' or 'cigarette', depending on the local dialect. The use of these words can fail to convey the actual message to someone who is not familiar with the dialect one are using. For example, one of the researchers' children, a girl, had her friend sleep over at age six. During bath time, she reminded her friend to wash her cigarette, which was very confusing to the visiting girl.

### *Resources*

There was a shortage of isiZulu resources in schools and at the university level and this challenge was not easy to overcome within a short

space of time. The university does not have enough staff who can teach in isiZulu, which meant that this program could not be extended to other courses. For example, Numeracy (PGCE) was still taught in English because there was no staff.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is clear that transformation is a journey, an unending process. The issue of language or mother tongue teaching is just one of many issues that need attention. For example, gender, disability, employment equity, and curriculum also need attention if the university is to equalize opportunities and become responsive to the challenges of a democratic, non-sexist society that South Africa is striving to become.

Although there was resistance exhibited by the university community (Moodley 2009), this did not hinder the implementation process as the PGCE FP as still being offered in the dual medium of instruction and it is a popular program amongst students. The attitudes of people towards isiZulu as the language of learning, is also an area for concern. This is supported by Govender (2009) who states that there are mixed feelings among the isiZulu speaking groups. Some are excited about the implementation, yet on the other hand, they have fear that they will not be at par with English students in the teaching of English. This argument reflects the hegemonic position of the English.

What emerges from these findings is that University X is engaging with the national transformation policy and has responded through its own language policy, which is being implemented with some success although there is some negativity in some quarters. It also shows that there are serious challenges that require human resource and materials development, which have financial implications. The colloquium referred to earlier increased the participants' awareness of the importance of teaching in mother tongue. Such meetings can also be used to share experiences from school and university contexts where students have benefitted from being taught in the mother tongue.

## **CONCLUSION**

University X has displayed characteristics of being an agent of change as it has taken seri-

ous steps to move from what it was during the apartheid era. This is evident in the policies it has developed, which show a shift from that era to the present. In accordance with the constitution of South Africa, its policies address issues of inequality, equity and diversity, thereby increasing access to HE for the historically disadvantaged groups. The institution has taken serious steps to transform in deciding to teach in one of the African Languages. This was unthinkable in the apartheid era and more so in a historically white institution.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommends the following:

- ♦ There is a need to address negative attitudes as this will affect the implementation of this initiative. It is therefore, in the interest of this institution to extend the debate to include parents, teachers and students so that consensus can be reached.
- ♦ The issue of the shortage of resources could be addressed by employing more people who speak isiZulu or retraining some of the current staff in isiZulu. The university can also encourage staff to produce academic texts and publish papers in isiZulu.

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