The challenge of multilingualism: in response to the language policy for higher education

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Abstract
This article investigates the requirements of the newly released Language policy for higher education and provides guidelines for an educational approach that would support multilingual higher education. In a nutshell, this policy challenges higher education institutions to provide in the linguistic needs of the new, more diverse and potentially larger student population brought about by greater equity of access, while maintaining quality in education and creating an environment where multilingualism can flourish. This article argues that the policy is necessary, but does not go far enough and that although one can support its existence up to a point, it does not provide enough concrete proposals to steer implementation. Despite its laudable goals, the policy, therefore, cannot support the development of additive multilingualism. In an effort to provide more concrete goals to attain multilingualism, this article discusses the concept of biliteracy as a medium term goal on the road to multilingual higher education.

THE LANGUAGE POLICY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

On 5 November 2002 the Minister of Education released the long-awaited Language policy for higher education (LPHE). This policy was preceded by investigations conducted by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (published in July 2001 as the Language policy framework for South African higher education, 2001) and by the investigation into historically Afrikaans institutions conducted by Prof Jakes Gerwel and submitted to the ministry on 14 January 2002 (Gerwel Report 2002).

In view of the problems that such a policy has to address it is admirable that it was eventually published. However, the Department of Education really had no choice, because it is directed by the Constitution and constrained by language policy issues in the General Education and Training phase (GET: the first nine years of schooling) and Further Education and Training phase (FET: the next phase of schooling before higher education is entered) to develop a policy for the Higher Education and Training phase as well. In the midst of vocal and highly publicised demands from various groups, for example from historically Afrikaans universities on the one hand and demands for transformation of the higher education landscape

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on the other, the policy makers were faced with the task of pleasing some groups or making compromises that would please nobody.

The recommendations of the CHE report and the Gerwel report were, in the main, accepted by the ministry. The multilingual nature of South African campuses is acknowledged and validated by the LPHE (Ministry of Education 2002:3), which requires of all higher education institutions to advance the official South African languages, in accordance with the Constitution because, ‘in line with its founding provisions of non-racialism, non-sexism, human dignity and equity, [it] not only accords equal status to all our languages, but recognises that given the marginalisation of indigenous languages in the past, the state “must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages” (section 6(2) of the Constitution)’. Furthermore, the LPHE (Ministry of Education 2002:4–5) acknowledges the fact that language can and does act as a barrier to access, ‘in the sense that African and other languages have not been developed as academic/scientific languages and in so far as the majority of students entering higher education are not fully proficient in English and Afrikaans’.

These two issues; the ideal of developing a multilingual environment and the reality of access being limited to students who can manage their studies mainly in English, create tension and a centrifugal force that the policy conveniently passes on to higher education institutions (LPHE, Ministry of Education 2002:5): ‘The challenge facing higher education is to ensure the simultaneous development of a multilingual environment in which all our languages are developed as academic/scientific languages, while at the same time ensuring that the existing languages of instruction do not serve as a barrier to access and success.’ This sentence is a paraphrase of two sections in the Constitution; the first is the above-mentioned section 6(2) and the other is section 29(2) which requires that the state ensure ‘effective access’ to education by considering ‘all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account equity; practicability; and the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices’.

The fact that the LPHE merely repeats the provisions of the Constitution surely cannot be a justifiable course of action. Although the task of the ministry is extraordinarily difficult (as will be elaborated upon below) and although the policy provides some guidelines for the development of African languages, it does not fulfil its task as a document that should provide more concrete direction (the ‘practical and positive measures’ mentioned in the Constitution) for the implementation of multilingualism.

At best the policy can be interpreted as a clear directive: develop a multilingual environment and ensure that students can use the existing language of instruction in such a way that throughput improves. However, this directive can be interpreted in ways that constitute a continuum between two extremes, yet still remain true to the policy:
A limited interpretation of multilingualism, which continues the full-blown investment of human and financial resources in academic support programmes to improve students’ cognitive academic proficiency in English, while research is done on the development of the other South African languages.

OR

A broader and far-reaching interpretation of additive multilingualism (see below) that includes the maintenance of Afrikaans and gradual incorporation of African languages as languages of learning and teaching (LOLTs), while gradually decreasing academic support in English and Afrikaans.

If institutions should choose the first option, the ideal of truly multilingual education cannot be realised. The ‘development’ of other South African languages will remain an esoteric exercise: describing the grammar and the lexis, creating and studying works of literature and at best, developing specific purposes language corpora. In support of additive multilingualism (as explained below) in higher education, this article would like to present arguments based on the second interpretation by focusing on the increased use of African languages to develop biliteracy as an explicitly stated instrument to increase throughput and enhance the status of these languages as full-blown academic languages.

INTRODUCING OR MAINTAINING LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The status of English as the higher education language of learning, teaching and research is undisputed worldwide. Established European universities that have used local languages for centuries increasingly switch to English to remain competitive internationally and very few voices question this practice. Therefore, when one moots the introduction or maintenance of languages other than English, this must be done in the realisation that this is going against comfortable assumptions.

As is the case with arguments about home language instruction in the primary and secondary phases of education here in South Africa and in the rest of the world, there is often the sense that a choice must be made between the home language and English, whereas the main issue should be the development of multilingualism, as pointed out repeatedly in the LPHE (Ministry of Education 2002:5) when it calls for the ‘simultaneous development of a multilingual environment in which all our languages are developed as academic/scientific languages’. However, the proviso that follows immediately on this sentence (‘while at the same time ensuring that the existing languages of instruction do not serve as a barrier to access and success’, 2002:5) again introduces the fatal ambiguity in the policy that effectively neutralises the call for multilingualism and
makes it possible for institutions to focus on English as the language of access and instruction.

The opportunity to develop African languages in a multilingual context is offered to institutions of higher education in the LPHE (Ministry of Education 2002:10) which declares that ‘[t]he Ministry agrees with the Council on Higher Education that consideration should be given to the development of other South African languages for use in instruction, as part of a medium to long-term strategy to promote multilingualism’. What is lacking in the LPHE is the identification of specific instruments and milestones for the medium and the long term.

PITTING HOME LANGUAGES AGAINST ENGLISH

In an effort to avoid the debates that pit home languages against English, this section of the article argues that by focusing on issues of acquiring and supporting literacy in more than one language, it is possible to develop convincing arguments in favour of multilingual education. In the interests of the transformation of higher education it is crucial, for reasons that will be elaborated upon below, that multilingual approaches to teaching and learning be implemented to support the goals of equity, access and improved throughput.5 There is little sense in repeating feel-good statements such as, ‘[t]he ability to speak more than one of South Africa’s official languages and the development and promotion of respect for all languages used by South Africans constitute foundational values of our post-apartheid society’ (CHE 2001:2). The focus on speaking an African language leads to the introduction of first-year courses that equip students with little more than the ability to greet somebody.6 The promotion of respect must be based on students’ experience that their home languages are useful in high status domains such as a higher education classroom.

There have recently been a number of voices inside and outside of South Africa echoing the sentiment that home languages should not be pitted against languages of wider communication, for example the multiliteracies movement (New London Group 1996) and projects that seek to advance multilingual education in South Africa (Heugh, Siegruehn & Plueddeman 1995). These studies indicate the value of home language literacy being treated as a goal in its own right, rather than a mere bridge to English (Street 1994:24). In South Africa Banda (2000:59) supports this conclusion by stating ‘it makes more pedagogical sense to argue for improving both mother-tongue and EMOI [English medium of instruction] education than to use the CALP [cognitive academic language proficiency] and CUP [common underlying proficiency] arguments for mother-tongue education’.
ACADEMIC BILITERACY IN A MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT

The status quo

In South Africa it is easy and fashionable to admire bi- and multilingualism and to make pronouncements on its benefits. It is not clear, however, how this ability would benefit students’ academic careers (if at all). As the CHE report (2001:6) points out: ‘Most Higher Education institutions see the obvious solution to their language of tuition problems in a remedial perspective, ie, what is necessary is that students should be afforded better access to English as a Second Language and academic development or support programmes . . . All the Higher Education institutions have specialised courses for improving students’ proficiency in English with a view to promoting academic literacy.’

Institutions take this course of action because they are faced with increasing numbers of limited English proficiency students from disadvantaged school backgrounds and are reacting to the serious problem of students who need academic literacy to study successfully. Like teachers in the GET and FET, individual lecturers who use or allow the use of more than one language develop or invent bi- and multilingual teaching methods and techniques without any sense of whether such methods are beneficial or supportive of learning. For example, lecturers code-switch or repeat and translate parts of their lecture; they provide notes or transparencies in one language and speak in another. This situation is prevalent at some historically Afrikaans universities, where the bilingual nature of instruction may include class notes, study guides, course outlines, Web-based materials and transparencies in both English and Afrikaans. At historically disadvantaged institutions, where the lecturer may know an African language and where the students are a fairly homogeneous group, code-switching from English to an African language or so-called street language may take place, or discussions about the work will take place in an African language during consultation hours. There is no pedagogic reasoning behind these practices, just a vague sense of wanting to accommodate the students.

If higher education institutions should decide to follow the broader (second) interpretation of the LPHE (as this article does) contextualised research is needed to train and support lecturers and to empower students who have the cognitive advantage of knowing more than one language. As Heugh (in Heugh, Siegruehn & Plueddemann 1995:45) points out, there is a difference between access to higher education and ‘meaningful access’ which would lead to successful study. Meaningful access should imply, among others, the utilisation of all cognitive tools that students already have to ensure successful study. How this can be brought about will be discussed in section 5.
Multilingual environments

The distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism becomes increasingly important in multilingual contexts, because ‘in an additive bilingual education programme the first language is maintained and supported’ (*Longman dictionary*). In the case of subtractive bilingualism (where the learner’s home language is replaced), bilingualism is simply a short stop on the journey towards monolingualism. Additive multilingualism has also been studied and the same positive cognitive and social effects are indicated (Cenoz & Genesee 1998:25–26). Moreover, the same conditions hold as for additive bilingualism: ‘Multilingual education must be “additive” if it is to lead to the positive outcomes that educators aim for and that have been documented systematically in the case of bilingualism and some forms of bilingual education’ (Cenoz & Genesee 1998:27), and ‘additive multilingual education, like additive bilingual education, may be more likely to occur in settings where the students’ first language is fully developed’ (Cenoz & Genesee 1998:28).

The most important implication is that additive bi- and multilingualism does not mean that all the languages are used in exactly the same domains. As Tucker (1998:18) points out, the language competence of bilinguals ‘should not be regarded as simply the sum of two monolingual competencies, but should rather be judged in conjunction with the users’ total linguistic repertoire’. (See also Pedraza & Pousada 1992). When we extend this point to multilinguals, the picture becomes more colourful, because the linguistic repertoire is larger. Tucker (1998:19) contends, ‘multilingual speakers will have more specific distributions of functions and uses for each of their languages’.

It would be facile to say that a Sotho speaker develops ‘literacy’ in the home language and then readily transfers the ability to English, because we know that the kind of bi- and multilingualism that many South African students demonstrate is not additive and will not support bi- or multilingual education. Even first-language students may exhibit fluent language use in day-to-day interaction but will not be able to handle cognitively demanding, academic language. Higher education practitioners’ experience is that most students need additional support (in both the home language and, if it differs, in the language of learning and teaching) to develop academic literacy. In cases where the language of learning differs from the home language, students need home language support or may use their home languages to deal with the *content* of university courses.

When the LPHE is read (optimistically) as supporting multilingualism, it indicates the necessity of developing academic literacy in more than one language by recognising ‘the important role of higher education in the promotion of multilingualism for social, cultural, intellectual and economic development’ and the need to fund research and development in curriculum development (Ministry of Education 2002:14). The way in which home language literacy can be developed to support academic literacy in another language indicates a possible functional
distribution of different literacies as a medium term goal in the development of all South African languages as languages of science.

This means that home language literacy is exploited in the development of academic literacy in English or Afrikaans. At the same time home languages are validated and developed to become fully functional in higher education. Such a strategy is in line with the LPHE (Ministry of Education 2002:10) requirement that ‘consideration should be given to the development of other South African languages for use in instruction, as part of a medium to long-term strategy to promote multilingualism’.

However, the LPHE does not refer to additive multilingualism as a goal in higher education, thereby offering an escape clause for institutions to opt for the more limited interpretation of multilingualism which is described in a far too general way as providing ‘an inclusive institutional environment advancing tolerance and respect for diversity’ (Ministry of Education 2002:9). There is, furthermore, no attempt to link the provisions of the policy to the language provisions governing the GET and FET phases where additive bi- and multilingualism is supposed to be grounded. Except for a reference to the danger of decreasing enrolments in language studies (which ‘has serious implications for teacher training and the promotion of multilingualism in [G]eneral and [F]urther education’, Ministry of Education 2002:8) there is no attempt to link the LPHE to the larger educational framework of language requirements. Since the further education phase in particular prepares students for higher education, the LPHE missed a golden opportunity to set concrete entry level requirements for multilingual language proficiency. Such provisions would have underlined the Ministry’s commitment to multilingualism and may even have had positive consequences for home language instruction at lower educational levels.

**Academic biliteracy in national and international multilingual environments**

Educational linguists accept that there is a large gap between everyday language proficiency and academic language proficiency. Moreover, a specific level of proficiency in the home language is necessary before it is possible to transfer language abilities to academic studies in another language. In South African institutions of higher education, as studies at the University of Pretoria pointed out, students’ cognitive academic language abilities are generally insufficient to handle studies at tertiary level (Weideman & Van Rensburg 2002). General academic support programmes focus on first year, first semester language support, which is hardly sufficient to close the gap. A learner-centred approach requires that language needs be addressed beyond the first year, and with reference to genre-specific language support.

These problems are not unique to South Africa. A study by Daller and Grotjahn (1999) reports on the academic language proficiency of Turkish students who live in Germany and then returned to Turkey to study German. They (Daller &
Grotjahn 1999:157) found that students who appear fluent in the language of learning and teaching are not necessarily able to handle cognitively demanding material and that they present a ‘linguistic façade’ which may fool lecturers into thinking that they have sufficient mastery to be successful at tertiary studies. They emphasise that ‘everyday language proficiency [in German] is acquired in a few years, whereas the development of academic language proficiency needs much more time’ (Daller & Grotjahn 1999:168).

Khuwaileh and Shoumali (2000) report on the English writing abilities of Arabic students at tertiary level and they conclude (2000:182) that, ‘[c]orrelating our learners’ abilities in both Arabic and English implies that some of the participants’ problems in English writing can be linked to the deep-rooted problems in Arabic writing’. It is precisely these kinds of problems that point towards the benefits of developing academic biliteracy and there is increasing evidence that ‘bilingual, and frequently biliterate, tasks improve language proficiency in both the Heritage Language [eg Chinese, Spanish in the United States of America (US)] and in English’ (Tse 2001:266).

Researchers such as Braine (2002) and Canagarajah (2002) emphasise the importance of maintaining and exploiting contact with home language teachers and peers (Braine 2002:66) and of recognising students’ needs to ‘take their identities, values, and interests with them as they communicate in the academy’ (Canagarajah 2002:37). Students can challenge the powerful LOLT by using their home languages to do discourse analysis of mainstream academic texts and participate in group activities to debate, reason about and analyse topics. Canagarajah (2002:36) claims that by doing this, ‘students simulate the activity of the disciplinary communities in constructing the discourses that they agree to uphold in an effort to encode their world view and maintain their identity’.

Just as multilingualism does not imply the full use of more than one language in all possible domains (as explained in 4.2 above), the kind of biliteracy that is envisaged here is that of ‘multicompetent language users’ (Cook 1999) who use the various languages at their disposal for different purposes. In this sense academic literacy becomes the ability, for example, to use more than one language to make sense of complex texts and to make effective notes fast and efficiently (i.e. without having to rely on word for word copying, but interpreting the lecture/text in whatever languages that will provide the relevant insights in the shortest time). Similarly the effective use of bilingual dictionaries, glossaries and translation skills are manifestations of high-level academic biliteracy. The spin-off might be that the other South African languages develop and maintain their ability to mediate scientific concepts. Home language support in discussion groups is not a new idea, but can be extended and facilitated by lecturers to include literacy activities in the home language. Such concrete steps should have been advanced as medium term goals in the LPHE.

The development of biliteracy (in the home language and the LOLT) is particularly important in South Africa because it involves languages with a lower
status than English in a highly prestigious enterprise: learning and teaching in higher education. In addition to strengthening academic literacy, the result will be that African languages and Afrikaans widen the domains in which they are used.

**TOWARDS MULTILINGUAL POLICY MAKING AND PRACTICES**

The degree to which multilingual education in general and biliteracy in particular can be implemented, requires an investigation into possible starting points for putting biliteracy into practice, with the specific aim of supporting transformative processes in higher education.

**Integrating language planning and policy in the educational landscape**

Language planning for increased learning efficiency and, hopefully better throughput rates, must be formalised in institutional policies, as required by the LPHE: ‘All higher education institutions are required to develop their own language policy subject to the above policy framework, which should be submitted to the Minister by 31 March 2003’ (Ministry of Education 2002:15). However, integration with existing national initiatives (like quality assurance requirements) and institutional policies (like curriculum review and assessment policies, guidelines for the development of course outlines and study guides) would be a more effective way of including language requirements that would support learning. This is an approach recommended by Saravia-Shore and Arvizu (1992:499), who see bilingual and bicultural education as part of curriculum reform and inclusive education. In the case of curriculum review and assessment policies, the critical cross-field outcomes, specifically those dealing with communication and sensitivity for other cultures, could be addressed by means of code-switching and translation activities in class. Integrated assessment could, for example, include the outcome that students demonstrate their ability to communicate scientific concepts by summarising the findings of a project in a language other than the main language of learning and teaching.

Multilingualism and biliteracy as educational principles could be supported actively in institutional language planning (and policy, if necessary) by means of the initiatives mentioned above. The advantage of these approaches is that effective planning or policy-making becomes possible because it relies on a thorough understanding of the behaviour and attitudes of the people for whom the planning or policy is intended. It takes people’s fears regarding the limitations of home languages as well as expectations for English as a language of wider communication into account and focuses on effective teaching and learning.

**Language support practices**

Literacy in a language other than the language of learning and teaching can take different forms. One example of home language support is that recommended by
the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP): ‘whenever in the United States there are pupils or students for whom Spanish is the native tongue, at whatever level from kindergarten to the baccalaureate, there be established in the schools and colleges special sections for developing literacy in Spanish and using it to reinforce or complement other areas of the curriculum’ (Roca 1992).

Bangeni (2002) describes an experiment in which University of Cape Town students’ attitudes towards the use of home languages in academic writing activities were measured. Although students are sensitive to the importance of English, the urge to ‘assert their language identities’ (2002:5) is clear, particularly in this case where the topic of discussion (praise poetry) was directly relevant to their cultural experiences. As Bangeni (2002:10) concludes, ‘[a]s the languages that the students speak form an integral part of their cultural capital, it is worth exploring how using them in the learning process helps to widen access’.

Another opportunity is to develop learner corpora (academic word lists based on frequency of occurrence in academic texts) and to include technical word lists in African languages and in Afrikaans when course outlines and study guides are being developed. The input of language departments and post-graduate research projects is vital here because the development of learner corpora for teaching and learning purposes is still in its infancy. The main purpose of applying language corpora to local contexts can be found in ‘the stress laid on the importance of frequency of occurrence, a form of information which is for the first time starting to become widely and informatively available to the language teacher through corpora’ (Leech 1997:15).

This type of language information supports the approach to academic literacy explained above: a needs-based, genre-based approach to language facilitation. It also supports the observation in the LPHE (2002:10) that ‘the promotion of South African languages for use in instruction in higher education will require, amongst others, the development of dictionaries and other teaching and learning materials’. For example, a learner’s corpus based on the texts that have to be understood and produced in a first year general science course, could be used to help students with the English terminology of their subjects, and when it is translated (by, for example the students themselves), would also indicate non-English speaking students’ understanding of the subject. Similar ‘translation’ tasks could be to ask that students generate summaries of key texts in their home languages. If the lecturer knows the home languages, such summaries will be an indication of learners’ depth of understanding. Good summaries could also be used as exemplars for subsequent groups. A very necessary follow-up on all such tasks would be to do action research to determine their effectiveness. Academic staff development units have a role to play in raising awareness and training lecturers in the use of code switching and translation activities in the classroom.
CONCLUSION

In the light of all the pressures that face higher education institutions to improve the performance of their learners and to be accountable for the amount of money invested in them, it is important that the linguistic strengths that learners bring with them be recognised and used to the advantage of all.

When a broad interpretation of the LPHE is followed and multilingualism is understood to be additive, then the intentions of the ministry with regard to the development of multilingualism in higher education must be applauded. The LPHE (Ministry of Education 2002:15–16) concludes by saying:

The above framework is designed to promote multilingualism and to enhance equity and access in higher education through:

- The development, in the medium to long-term, of South African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education, alongside English and Afrikaans;
- The development of strategies for promoting student proficiency in designated language(s) of tuition;
- The retention and strengthening of Afrikaans as a language of scholarship and science;
- The promotion of the study of South African languages and literature through planning and funding incentives;
- The promotion of the study of foreign languages; and
- The encouragement of multilingualism in institutional policies and practices.

These are all laudable goals but the words will remain empty if there is no follow up in the form of concrete requirements. As such the policy has failed in its attempt to fulfil the directive of the Constitution, which is that the state ‘must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these [African] languages’ (section 6(2) of the Constitution, emphasis added). Ultimately then, the policy is obviously necessary but does not go far enough and although those in favour of additive multilingualism can support its existence up to a point, it does not provide enough concrete proposals to steer implementation.

NOTES

1 The development of a language policy for higher education has been postponed because of the problematic nature of such a policy. In 1999 the CHE (CHE 2001:1) decided ‘in terms of the Higher Education Act of 1997 to advise the Minister for Education around language policy for higher education’ by establishing a national task group. The task group submitted a report with recommendations to the minister in July 2000. The Gerwel report was commissioned by the Minister of Education and conducted ‘by the informal committee
convened to provide you with advice on the position of Afrikaans within the university system’ (Gerwel report covering letter 2002).

2 Language corpora in the sense of word lists that contain the most frequently used words in specific domains or, in this case, disciplines.

3 According to Tse (2001:256), this is ‘the ability to use literacy in two languages’.

4 See for example Phillipson and Skutnab Kangas (1999) on the use of English in Denmark.

5 This is an education policy that is being implemented in Hong Kong, where biliteracy and trilingualism is encouraged, so that students become literate in Putongua (Chinese) and English, but retain Cantonese for everyday communication (Bing 2002).

6 The methodology of teaching African languages is another issue that cannot be addressed here.

7 See van der Walt, Mabule and de Beer (2001) for a discussion of code switching practices at this level.

8 In a study done by van der Walt and Mabule (2001) teachers of Mathematics, Biology and Science classes were very ambivalent when asked whether they thought that code switching was good practice. Forty six per cent thought that this was not a good idea. See also the CHE report (2001:4 5) on the use of African languages in tuition at higher education institutions.

9 This is also cause for concern as far as diagnostic language tests are concerned, specifically those that test general language skills at the start of the first year and that give students exemption from language support on the basis of the tests.

10 See Tse 2001 for references to such studies.

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