Progress and challenges for language policy implementation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

Nobuhle Ndimande-Hlongwa, Robert J. Balfour, Nhlanhla Mkhize and Charlotte Engelbrecht

College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa; Registrar’s Office, St Augustine College of South Africa, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa

The University of KwaZulu-Natal approved its bilingual language policy in 2006 based on the framework of the National Language Policy for Higher Education of 2002. The guiding principles of this policy suggest that the university develops the use of isiZulu as a language of instruction and communication, in line with recommendations of the Ministerial Committee report, which investigated the development of indigenous African languages as media of instruction in higher education. The implementation of the bilingual policy began in 2008, under the responsibility of the university’s language board and faculties. Whilst debates on the policy itself are endless, there are foreseen challenges in its implementation. This is a case of ‘acquisition planning’ as in effect acquisition of isiZulu as a second language will be expected from all the university staff and students. The purpose of this article is to discuss some of these challenges and to identify steps towards language policy implementation.

Introduction

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) was born out of the merger of two institutions, the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville, following government restructuring plans that have reduced the number of tertiary institutions in South Africa from 36 to 21. In the wake of the merger, UKZN set out in 2004 to develop a new language policy based on wide-ranging consultation within the university community. The resulting bilingual language policy, approved in August 2006, stipulates that isiZulu will be developed to provide students with access to the language for research, learning and teaching, especially in the professional areas of nursing, education, psychology, law and commerce. This language policy is in line with the UKZN’s (2008) vision of becoming ‘the premier university of African scholarship’ and follows Botha’s view (2005) that Africanisation is one of the key imperatives for the transformation of higher education in South Africa. The aim of this article is to discuss the challenges faced in implementing the language policy at UKZN. The article begins with a general overview of language planning as the broader field of study and reviews the debates engendered by the UKZN policy in particular. We then discuss the
implementation of the language policy at a micro-level through a presentation of the South African–Norway Tertiary Education Development Programme (SANTED) multilingualism project that has involved piloting courses in isiZulu in nursing, psychology and education at UKZN.

Language planning and its challenges at UKZN

This article falls within the broader field of language planning which Toffelson (1991: 16) defines as:

[a] conscious effort to affect the structure or function of language varieties. These efforts may involve creation of orthographies, standardization and modernisation programmes, or allocation of functions to particular languages within multilingual societies.

According to Webb (2002: 37):

Language planning is a systematic, rational, theory-based effort at the societal level to solve language problems with a view to increasing welfare. It is typically conducted by official bodies or their surrogates and aimed at part or all of the population living under its jurisdiction.

Cooper (1989) chose to categorise language planning into three categories: status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning. Status planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the allocation of functions among a community’s languages (Cooper 1989: 99). Corpus planning (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997: 38), on the other hand, can be defined as those aspects that are primarily linguistic and hence internal to language such as orthographic innovation of language material. Examples of corpus planning are language standardisation, and elaboration or modernisation. Acquisition planning refers to organised efforts to promote the learning of a language and is the focus of this article, as UKZN prepares itself for implementing its bilingual language policy.

The UKZN language policy has of course been controversial. Regional newspaper reporters and some academics have questioned why UKZN should choose to promote isiZulu, seeing this as more appropriate to Zululand University, for example, which has ‘an almost exclusively Zulu-speaking student catchment region’, (The Witness, 14 August 2006: 8). This no doubt harks back to thinking dominant during the apartheid period when tertiary institutions were strictly segregated along ethno-linguistic lines following Verwoerd’s Bantu Education Act (No. 47) of 1953 and the Extension of University Act (Act 45 of 1959). Nevertheless, there has also been positive press coverage. For example, Balfour (Weekly Mail and Guardian, 26 January–1 February 2007: 2–3) emphasised the benefits of multilingualism in education for all South Africans in providing a mechanism for nation building and intercultural communication, as well as social and economic capital, while Ngubane (quoted in Sookra 2006: 2) noted that introducing isiZulu will enable students who are not first language English speakers to express themselves and to write their exams and assignments in their own language, thus improving learning opportunities and widening participation in higher education.

Press coverage also revealed a number of misconceptions of the UKZN policy. Newspaper reports assumed, for example, that staff would be expected to teach and carry out assessments in isiZulu immediately. In fact, the UKZN language policy has a 10-year implementation plan (2008–2018), and while the aim is eventually to
provide teaching in both isiZulu and English, translation or interpreting services may be provided initially. Parents and other stakeholders (as reflected in the *Mercury* newspaper, (Naidoo 2006)) also feared that the aim of the bilingual language policy was to get rid of English altogether. The approach being followed by UKZN is in fact the Complementary Language Use Approach (Madiba 2004: 34), as recommended by scholars such as Bamgbose (1997). This proposes that the African languages should be used as auxiliary media of instruction in disciplines other than languages, with the long-term goal of using them as primary – if not exclusive – media of instruction in certain disciplines, according to the realities of the society concerned.

Beyond the debates on the UKZN language policy itself, its implementation has brought with it major challenges. Funding has been identified as an overarching issue, with the university considering seeking support from potential external stakeholders including South African government agencies, the European Union and commercial funding bodies such as the Amalgamated Banks of South Africa. Developing materials to deliver university courses in isiZulu has also been highlighted by UKZN academics as a major undertaking: language expert Kathleen Heugh, for example, (quoted in Zulu 2006: 6) recommended that materials development should be prioritised for undergraduate level only. Furthermore, staff development is clearly a major concern: in 2007, the head of psychology at UKZN defined the biggest challenge as finding ways to ‘create time and space’ for already overworked staff to attend the staff isiZulu courses (quoted in Dell 2007).

**Piloting implementation: the SANTED multilingualism project**

As a step towards implementing the UKZN language policy, a three-year pilot project in providing targeted isiZulu language training for students and staff has been underway in the UKZN Department of Education. The project, entitled Multilingualism to Promote Access, Retention and Successful Professional Training is part of the South African–Norway Tertiary Education Development Programme (SANTED). In partnership with the Durban University of Technology, it focuses on enabling future graduates in professional disciplines to interact with clients in both English and isiZulu. This follows work by Pillay and Kramers (2003), which found that while many South African graduates are proficient in their fields of expertise, they are unable to communicate professionally with clientele who speak African languages. The project involves four disciplines: nursing, education, psychology and dental assisting. In designing courses for these contexts, a communicative approach to language teaching has been adopted, emphasising the use of language for real contexts of communication, as defined by Larsen-Freeman (1986: 128):

> Language as it is used in a real context should be included; the target language is the vehicle for classroom communication, not just the object of study; errors are tolerated; the grammar and vocabulary that the students learn follow from the function, situational context and roles of interlocutors.

In what follows, we review the SANTED project approaches to promoting the isiZulu language in three of the four disciplines (nursing, psychology and education) and highlight their achievements and challenges.
Bilingualism for community health: nursing partnership

‘In South Africa, the nursing staff and patients often speak in different languages, or belong to different cultures’ (Kyriacos et al. 2008: 84). Although in the nursing literature, attention is given to the importance of cultural sensitivity (Giger and Davidhizar 2003; Daly and Jackson 2004), the language needs of nurses in the South African context has not received as much attention as one might predict, given the transformation process South Africa is experiencing (Engelbrecht et al. 2008). Effective nursing care clearly depends on understanding between client and nurse (Kyriacos et al. 2008: 83). In a comparative study on how doctors and nurses explain information to their patients (Collins 2005), the importance of nurses’ communication skills is evident. As Barret (2006: 1140) puts it, the nurse explains a situation to a patient from the subjectivities of everyday life, conveying the ‘voice of a life world’. The doctor may use the ‘voice of medicine’ with its analytical objective scientific style, which may be hard for a patient to understand. It is thus vital to develop nurses’ ability to communicate medical concepts to a patient and his/her family in a language they will understand. In South African practice, it is observed that the doctors are using nursing staff, administrative clerks, family members and even cleaning staff to interpret for them if they do not converse in the same language as the patient. Under the previous apartheid regime, doctors and nurses were trained in English and Afrikaans with health services generally only accessible in these two languages. To redress these inequalities of the past (Department of Education 1997a: 2), it is particularly important for health professionals to develop multilingualism. As the need for nursing professionals grows not only in South Africa but internationally, so does the need for cross-cultural competence and multilingualism (Engelbrecht et al. 2008). Hearnden (2007) revealed that there is a need for internationally educated nurses. Her findings indicated that current educational opportunities fall short of providing adequate sociolinguistic/socio-cultural preparation for many nurses to be able to function at the required entry level.

The UKZN School of Nursing is participating in the SANTED project in order to build capacity and develop academics toward multilingualism, as well as to train nurses capable of communicating with patients, families and community members in the communities they serve. The academic personnel in the School of Nursing are currently developing subject-specific words, phrases and meanings for nursing in isiZulu, in collaboration with the isiZulu Language Research and Development Centre (ILRDC), hosted by the University of Zululand and the School of isiZulu Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. These terms will be available to all students as part of their subject material as well as on an online site. This is being done to enable students to use both English and isiZulu in their clinical practice sites by engaging with community members and patients in isiZulu. This, it is hoped, will also lead to bilingual group discussion in the classroom – involving English, isiZulu and code switching.

The B. Nursing degree is a four-year comprehensive nursing degree in which students are taught and trained in four core nursing disciplines, namely general nursing (medical/surgical), community health nursing, psychiatric nursing and midwifery. The curriculum is very focused on subjects that apply to nursing. As nursing is a discipline that touches on the social sciences alongside the traditional health sciences, students are allowed to take four 16-credit social science subjects (amounting to six months’ study). Little provision is made, however, for students to
learn a new local language if they need to. Students are allowed to do one module of isiZulu as one of their social science subjects. This limitation in the course was addressed in 2009 during the recalibration process of the new nursing education structures that will align South African nursing with the South African national qualifications framework (Meyer and Van Niekerk 2008). Thanks to the work that has recently been undertaken as part of the SANTED project, meaningful strategies could be recommended to enable multilingualism to be embraced in the new course.

Five non-isiZulu speaking students who entered the first year of B. Nursing in 2007 were registered for the first semester module, Basic isiZulu 1A, as a credit-bearing elective in their curriculum. They had the opportunity to engage with the language by conversing informally with their peers and friends in isiZulu, and the module launched them on a journey to gain Basic proficiency in isiZulu. Evaluation by means of a questionnaire at the end of the course was positive, though all agreed that this was only the start of acquiring the isiZulu proficiency necessary to interacting with patients. This points to the need for ongoing language acquisition, preferably integrated into nursing components, as developed in the SANTED proposal.

Hereafter, during the second year of their training, the non-isiZulu speaking students will be grouped with isiZulu-speaking students to encourage them to function in isiZulu while they are doing community development projects as part of community health nursing practice. Students will be encouraged to use both English and isiZulu when they are giving health education to the community members. In the third year, it is hoped that these students will be able to discuss basic issues in isiZulu with patients when they see them in hospital sites. The most important point is that students develop the confidence to speak with their friends and colleagues, as well as their patients, and thus continue to develop their language skills with the encouragement of both the academic staff as well as clinical staff.

IsiZulu course for nursing academics

A second objective of the nursing project is to equip core staff facilitators of the second-year programme in community health with basic competency in spoken and written isiZulu. Of the seven non-isiZulu speaking academics in the school of nursing, five registered for an isiZulu course. They were issued with learning units, a multilingual dictionary and a notebook to collect vocabulary learnt as they performed their duties. The group met twice a week with a lecturer from the School of isiZulu Studies to work through the units. Attention was given to vocabulary, correct pronunciation and the forming of simple sentences to enable the staff to converse at a basic level. Cultural practices and information were interwoven with work on vocabulary to ensure that the students understood the context of use of the specific words they were learning. Assessment was informal: participants performed a nursing task that required isiZulu to be spoken, and their language proficiency was assessed in this way. Evaluation by participants suggested high levels of enthusiasm, both on the part of those learning isiZulu, who have started to use isiZulu more and more as their confidence and knowledge improves, and on the part of isiZulu-speaking staff, who are eager to assist and offer support.
The psychology partnership: partnerships for professional practice

Despite the fact that psychological work – be it counselling, assessment or research – is carried out primarily through the medium of language, very little attention has been paid to the question of language in the training of psychologists in South Africa (Pillay and Kramers 2003; Swartz and Drennan 2000). This has dire consequences for the provision of psychological services to the vast majority of the population, whose languages are neither Afrikaans nor English, the primary languages of psychological training and discourse in South Africa. This situation is complicated not only by the scarcity of African psychologists but also by the fact that almost all trainee psychologists of non-African descent presenting at major training hospitals in KwaZulu-Natal lack basic fluency in isiZulu, the language of the vast African majority in the province (Pillay and Kramers 2003). The local and international literature has consistently cited language as one of the most critical barriers to provision of quality psychological services to non-English (minority) clients (Swartz 1998; Sue and Sue 1999). In the South African context, Mkhize (2007) has argued that, in failing to train psychologists who can work across the language divide, institutions of higher learning could unwittingly reproduce practices of the apartheid era, whereby students were trained to work only with their own population group. Cognisant of the factors mentioned above, the School of Psychology sought to participate in the SANTED multilingualism pilot project.

The School of Psychology has prioritised two main objectives as far as the SANTED project is concerned. The first objective, justified by the status quo of psychological training in South Africa as mentioned above, is to develop a discipline-specific isiZulu course for professional psychology staff and students in order to enable them to develop communicative competency in isiZulu and to begin using it selectively and, as appropriate and feasible, for communicative and professional purposes. To this end, an introductory, discipline-specific isiZulu course has been running in the School on the Pietermaritzburg campus since August 2007, with a similar course being started at the Durban campus in March 2008. The courses, facilitated by lecturers in the School of isiZulu, comprise basic grammar, with a major focus on developing interaction skills across a number of contexts relevant to psychologists (e.g. doing an intake interview). The course recognises that psychology and culture are interdependent; for this reason, students are introduced to some elements of Zulu culture.

At its inception in August 2007, a total of 24 learners registered for the course, among them 17 masters students and interns, and seven academic and administrative members of staff. Participants included black students from non-isiZulu-speaking African states such as Angola and Nigeria. In one of the feedback sessions, these students reported that a basic knowledge of isiZulu not only helped them to establish rapport with their clients, but it also facilitated their integration into South African society. Some of the English-speaking research masters students who took part in the isiZulu classes in psychology in 2007 have already experienced some of the benefits of using their basic spoken isiZulu in the context of participatory action research. The fact that these students are required to conduct a research project in the community provided them with an opportunity to practise isiZulu in a real life setting. One of the stumbling blocks of learning isiZulu within a predominantly English-speaking university environment is lack of
opportunities for practice. Upon their return, the students presented a paper at an in-house postgraduate conference (Richards et al. 2007). They commented: ‘Knowing basic isiZulu is helpful in research activities; however, it is even more essential for building rapport between researchers and participants’. The students also noted that ‘Ukuhlonipha (to respect) is fundamental to the functioning of Zulu society, and it is most appreciated when non-Zulu speakers actually learn to speak the language properly’. These comments reveal the students’ increasing awareness of the importance of isiZulu in the practice of psychology in KwaZulu-Natal.

Two challenges emerged during the teaching of isiZulu in psychology: different levels of prior exposure to isiZulu among students and absence of opportunities to interact informally with isiZulu speakers outside the classroom context. The fact that some students were learning isiZulu for the first time, while others had taken some isiZulu classes previously, posed a challenge: it was difficult to pitch lessons at the right level for all students. To get around this problem, the facilitator encouraged those with some background experience in isiZulu to act as co-facilitators or tutors to other learners where appropriate.

The most difficult challenge, however, was to do with opportunities for integrating learning and interacting informally with isiZulu speakers outside the classroom context. For example, one of the students, a staff member, remarked during feedback sessions:

I think we should seriously discuss strategies specifically for helping staff to integrate this into their schedules. . . . Any learning strategy should a) provide ways of integrating small chunks of learning into a daily schedule in a seamless way [such as] using emails to teach vocabulary and b) providing regular opportunities to communicate in isiZulu [such as] having to reply to regular emails from tutors in isiZulu, and c) normalising communication in isiZulu in the School of Psychology environment. I think these aspects are essential to success and won’t happen by themselves.

The comments above are illuminating. When asked to explain what he meant by ‘normalising communication in isiZulu’, the staff member remarked that the speaking of isiZulu was so unusual for English-speaking staff within the university community that it might be taken as ‘showing off’. He also noted that even isiZulu-speaking students themselves may need to get used to the idea that it is legitimate to communicate with one’s lecturers in isiZulu.

The second, long-term objective of the psychology SANTED project, as with the other areas of the project, relates to materials development. Two senior students have been employed to extract key psychological terms and concepts, with a view to translating them in order to produce some supplementary reading material for use in selected tutorials. We have targeted the first-year modules (Introduction to Psychology) and the second-year research module (Introduction to Research), which are central to the psychology curriculum. The imperative to undertake this task arises from the observation that a number of African indigenous languages either do not readily have the vocabulary referring to a number of psychological states commonly found in standard psychology textbooks (for example, depression) or in patients’ experience, or express such states differently in what has been termed the ‘idiom of distress’ (Castillo 1997; Patel et al. 2001). It is therefore important to develop this knowledge base to facilitate communication about psychological concepts in isiZulu.
The education partnership: preparation for bilingualism in the early childhood classrooms

In the Faculty of Education, the SANTED project has taken the form of the Masikhulume isiZulu Programme (translated as the ‘Let’s Talk Programme’). This programme is tailored primarily for educators in early childhood development (hereafter ECD), but also for teachers of mathematics, literacy and life orientation. It also seeks to enable academic and support staff to develop some isiZulu communicative proficiency in their work related to ECD students, and to develop materials for future use with students.

In South Africa, the Language-in-Education Policy (Department of Education 1997b) makes provision for the use of the mother tongue for learning up to Grade 4 (age nine). In urban and even rural schools, multilingualism is now the norm, and children can expect to encounter other language speakers from an early age. However, at present, very few educators are training for bilingualism in this particular phase of development in faculties of education. There are three key factors to be considered in this regard. First, ECD contexts are overwhelmingly multilingual not only in former white schools, but also in townships, which by their very nature are multilingual as well. Second, student teachers recruited to this area tend overwhelmingly to be monolingual English speakers. Finally, very few ECD educators are training for bilingualism/multilingualism as a particular area of focus. Language pedagogy is covered in general terms, but seldom in relation to subject-specific areas.

The Masikhulume Programme is a practical course designed for ‘absolute’ beginners who have no knowledge of the isiZulu language and who wish to communicate in everyday situations with isiZulu speakers. Even simple exchanges can open channels of communication, and given that such communication should ultimately foster learning and teaching between student teachers and pupils, the SANTED-UKZN Education initiative is critical at this stage in the history of education development in South Africa. The programme also seeks to foster cultural awareness, better understanding and respect between different communities. The course focuses on communication in an education context through five topics: the language of the classroom and school, literacy, numeracy, life skills, and assessment. Each topic closes with an oral activity where the participants are given ample opportunity to apply the knowledge they have gained during the lesson presentation.

The staff for this programme includes two lecturers and two material developers. The programme is divided into two similar sessions per week scheduled in the late afternoon. Sessions formally commenced on 22 May 2007 with 12 participants, with six completing the course. Initial sections of the programme developed language ‘basics’ in the communicative mode and introduced participants to greetings, asking after a person’s health, asking a range of questions and equipping the participants to answer these questions. Subsequent sections focused on the language of the classroom and the school. While the last three topics of this programme – literacy, numeracy and life skills – were completed, it became evident that further consolidation of this work would need to be done in the new year (2008). The work that colleagues had provided for our materials developers was more complicated than we had envisaged, and staff felt that further participation in an ‘advanced’ Masikhulume Programme would serve to develop a stronger
understanding, rather than simple awareness, of the language (its lexicon and syntax) as a communicative tool. The programme concluded with an oral assessment task, performed in front of the class, which was based on all classroom work to date. Both lecturing staff and support staff felt that considerable learning had taken place. The point of describing the detail associated with the programme is to illustrate two facts that affect the impact of the initiative: first, that this is not a mainstream curricular intervention and thus depends on voluntary interest, and second, that the time associated with the intervention is premised on the minimum of what volunteers can afford away from their other professional work.

Conclusion: looking ahead and behind

The UKZN does not intend to compel academic staff members in schools and faculties to learn the isiZulu language, but individuals will be encouraged to volunteer or to learn isiZulu, depending on the nature of the disciplines and their involvement with community. In the case of support staff, there is an urgent need for them to learn conversational isiZulu because they are the public face of the institution. When students are admitted to the university, the first contact they have is with administration staff. The University Language Board (established in 2007) is currently embarking on a language audit to identify bilingual staff.

Some resistance to language policy implementation seems to be inevitable, but if advocacy comes from the senior leadership of an institution, some problems can be resolved at that level, thus facilitating the process and ‘buy-in’ at other levels (Balfour 2007). This point is also supported by Kaschula (2004: 16) with reference to the National Language Plan, which was approved at all the highest levels of the South African government. He noted, however, that it remains to be seen whether provincial members of parliament, provincial legislatures and government departments will implement and buy into the policy implementation plan. Acquisition planning needs to be accompanied by incentives to use the target language in the classroom and also in the workplace, but it is also important to understand the significance of the transformation agenda in higher education in South Africa and to take into consideration the Ministerial Committee’s recommendations in The Development of Indigenous African languages as Mediums of Instruction (Department of Education 2004). The Complementary Language Use Approach adopted by UKZN in the implementation of its language policy should enable staff and students to redefine themselves as members of a scholarly community that prides itself on African scholarship. It should enhance student learning and help to improve throughput; using isiZulu as a local language should also help staff and students to engage better with their local community in service learning and also in research-led community projects. IsiZulu as a local language will help in customising international knowledge for the public in general. As linguists, language planners and practitioners, we owe it to our institutions to assist in the implementation of language policies and to promote multilingualism in a democratic South Africa.

Note

1. The Bantu Education Act decreed that black South Africans should be provided with separate educational facilities, with the aim, as stated by Verwoerd, of preventing Africans from receiving an education that would lead them to aspire to positions they would not be
allowed to hold in society (Sookrajh 1990: 9). The Extension of University Act thus made
provision for a number of tribal colleges for blacks; for example, the University of
Durban-Westville was established for Indian students, the University of Zululand for
isiZulu and siSwati students, and the University of Fort Hare was turned into a tribal
college for Xhosa students.

References
Balfour, R. 2007. University language policies, internationalism, multilingualism, and
language development in South Africa and the United Kingdom. *Cambridge Journal of
Education* 37, no. 1: 35–49.
Bangbose, A. 2000. International Association for World Englishes (IAWE) and World
Englishes: which way forward? In *World Englishes*, ed. L.E. Smith and M.L. Forman,
Elizabeth, South Africa: Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.
Collins, S. 2005. Explanations in consultations: the combined effectiveness of doctors’ and
nurses’ communication with patients. *Medical Education* 39: 785–96.
Press.
Daly, J.E. and D.E. Jackson, eds. 2004. Transcultural health care: issues and challenges for
nursing. Special issue. *Contemporary Nurse* 15, no. 3.
whitewpapers/1997/education3.htm
Department of Education. 1997b. Language-in-Education Policy. Pretoria: Department of
Department of Education. 2002. *Language Policy for Higher Education*. Pretoria: Department of
School Languages in Higher Education*. Ministerial Committee’s report to the
students’ use of language in communicating with isiZulu clients in clinical settings in
Hearnden, M. 2007. Nursing across cultures: the communicative needs of internationally
educated nurses working with older adults. Paper delivered at Anela International
Research Meeting for Junior Applied Linguists, 24–26 January, at University of
task=view&id=61&Itemid=98#woude
Johannesburg: Multilingual Matters.
Kaschula, R.H. 2004. South Africa’s National Language Policy revisited: the challenge of
Kyriacos, U., R. de Swardt, F. Mtshali, T. Khanyile, J. van Heerden, S. Duma, L. Maree and
Prentice Hall.
Oxford University Press.
Madiba, M. 2004. ‘Trading where angels fear most’: the South African Government’s new
Town: Juta and Company.


