Multilingual Higher Education

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Multilingual Higher Education

Beyond English Medium Orientations

Christa van der Walt

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Preface

This book was written at a time when I attended a variety of conferences, some on bilingualism, others on bi-/multilingual higher education (HE), still others on English-medium universities and a substantial number on the problems of writing centres and their view of academic literacy development at the HE level in English. Each of these conferences seemed to attract a different group of participants despite the fact that the same themes emerged, albeit framed from the perspective of the organisers. My attempt here is to merge some of these themes, notably from HE studies, bilingual education, bilingualism and sociocultural theories of learning. I realise that I run the risk of not letting any one of these emerge clearly, but even the labour of writing this book has not dampened my conviction that these aspects need to be merged to guide multilingual HE teaching and learning practices.

The challenges of multilingual HE contexts grow particularly in times and places where money is tight, more so when the discourse of education is increasingly couched in market terms and linguistic diversity is seen as a liability rather than an asset. For the past 30 years, these are the issues that HE institutions have faced to varying degrees: from the Sorbonne in Paris to the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi, from the City University of New York to the City University of Hong Kong, from the Islamic College of Southern Africa in Cape Town to the International Christian University in Tokyo.

The spotlight here is on bi-/multilingual students and lecturers and the practices they develop when they take the liberty of using the languages they have at their disposal to make sense of academic discourse. My own experiences and current institution obviously colour my perceptions and I set out to include specifically African and European authors, also those who write in languages (other than English) that I can read. My only regret is that I did not do justice to the literature in other languages. My ideal of a multilingual text could not be realised this time, but that will come.

My purpose is to inform classroom practice rather than provide guidelines for institutional policies. Institutional, top-down policies seem time-consuming and rigid to me and they cannot allow for ever-changing classrooms and contexts. Furthermore, I see lecturers making decisions – some good, some (for me) not so good – and I am not convinced that policies will affect this state of affairs either way. For HE practitioners, I hope that the language arrangements and multilingual teaching scenarios will be

of use. The ideas expressed here continue to be shaped by three people in particular: Ofelia García, who constantly urged me to write the book; Colin Baker, who encouraged me in this area of study; and Neville Alexander, whose work in South Africa was a constant inspiration. With his passing away in August 2012, the South African educational and political scene lost a brilliant mind and an inspiring academic.

This book would not have been possible without the constant support of my husband André (*dankie – hoe sou ek dit sonder jou doen*¿!), my closest colleagues Renée Nathanson, Marguerite MacRobert, Phumla Kese and John Ruiters (thanks for the million cups of coffee and for knowing when to leave me alone), Liesel Hibbert (for her critical reading and valuable discussions), Nanda Klapwijk (for helping with teaching and serving as inspiration for the final chapter and, above all, for helping with the reference list). For my students, particularly the ones in the Multilingual Education modules since 2009: you challenged me by living out your multilingual identities.

I received financial support from the Von Humboldt Foundation, the National Research Foundation and my own institution, Stellenbosch University, for which I'm extremely grateful.

Christa van der Walt
June 2012

1 The Special Place of Higher Education

Context

In my own multilingual country, South Africa, language has a tangible presence that announces itself in virtually every encounter. When I buy something I try to guess the shop assistant's preferred language from the customary, bland 'Hi'; when students come to my office they seem to visibly calculate the possible advantages of a particular language choice; when I meet my departmental chair in his office I will speak English, but when he is in a predominantly Afrikaans group, we will probably address him in Afrikaans. My colleague, who is a home language speaker of Xhosa, will address her daughter alternately in English and Xhosa, and I will speak to my husband in English in her presence although our normal conversations are in Afrikaans. At my officially multilingual university, language is often the scapegoat for other, ideological disagreements; we often use English to hide and protect other identities. Language is also the ultimate olive branch, when, after a heated debate, a colleague uses a variety of Afrikaans to defuse the situation.

This pervasive and ubiquitous multiplicity of languages is typical of African societies and although my multilingualism does not even approach that of my African-language-speaking colleagues, I share the lived experience characterised by 'language mediation and translation [which] are common communicative bridges of everyday life' (Ouane, 2009: 59). In contrast to the often-pathologised vision of Africa as chaotic or underdeveloped because of its multilingual nature, I see language diversity as normative for 21st century societies. Ouane (2009: 57, emphasis added) provides the contrast between viewing societies through a monolingual lens as opposed to a multilingual view:

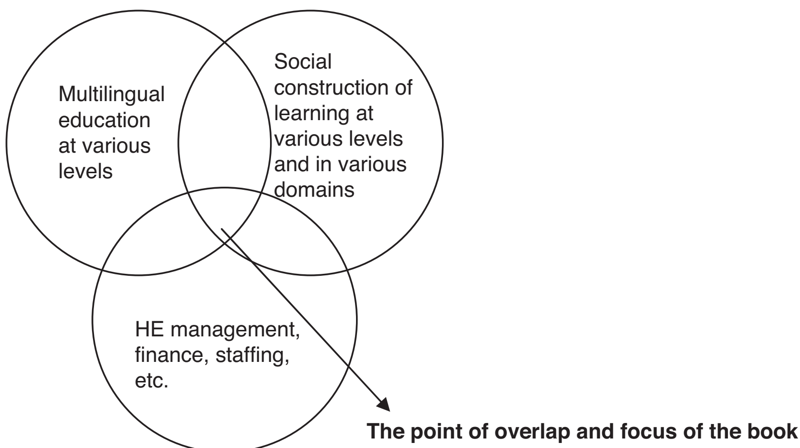
> Therefore the multilingual ethos refuses to see and interpret linguistic issues through the lens of one language, singling it out of the language *constellations*. It claims that multilingualism is not the juxtaposition or additive of many individual languages, but a *composite state* resulting from the interaction with a given number of languages within a *common* space.

The words that I italicised in this quotation reflect a multilingual *ethos* (Ouane, 2009: 59) by foregrounding the way in which languages interact in multiple ways (*constellation*) to form a picture of multiplicity (*a composite*

state) that is shared by a (relatively) stable community of users (a *common* space).

Such a multilingual ethos sees nominally monolingual higher education (HE) as restrictive of learning and teaching. In the course of this book I will argue that a value-driven stance towards multilingualism, which pays attention to social justice and equity (García, 2009: 336, Skutnab-Kangas *et al.*, 2009), prevents a perception of multilingual students and academic staff as problems that need to be 'fixed' by providing academic or language support of some kind. A multilingual ethos, as it emerges in many African societies, can provide the impetus for re-conceptualising multilingual education worldwide in a way that balances local and global interests.

One of the aims of this book is to demonstrate how two processes, one global and the other local, demand such re-conceptualisation if HE is to improve learning environments and, consequently, its throughput. The drive towards internationalisation is the first process. This is seen mainly as a response to global or globalising demands to be competitive (see Chapters 2 and 3). The second process, which is a local and regional process to widen participation of minoritised communities, is often a response to local and national government initiatives to increase participation rates in HE. The argument is that internationalisation of HE does not inevitably mean a bigger place for English but, in fact, increases the multilingual nature of HE (as shown by scholars such as Haberland & Risager, 2008: 43). At the same time, attempts at widening participation locally require an increased awareness and acknowledgement of bi-/multilingual teaching and learning practices to enable *epistemological access* (see Morrow, 1993; Boughey, 2002; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007) and thus improve students' chances of success. The theoretical justification for this claim draws on two perspectives: a multilingual perspective on education and the sociocultural perspective on learning. This book focuses on the overlap between these two perspectives that HE learning and teaching demands in an age of increasing international mobility and widened access:



Terminological Issues

Although terms will be clarified throughout the book, the use of certain terms needs to be clarified since they are used in a particular way for a particular reason.

- The term *language of learning and teaching* (LoLT) is used rather than the term *medium of instruction* to focus on the way in which language is used by both students and the lecturer. A language is not a neutral conduit for ideas, as implied by the term *medium of instruction.*
- The term *higher education* is used to refer to post-secondary education. By this is meant education that is mostly entered into voluntarily (in contrast to primary and, to an extent, secondary education that may be compulsory to differing degrees). Preparation for a particular profession or vocation is seen as the main task of such institutions, whether they be universities or colleges. In the literature, the term *post-secondary* is sometimes used to refer to any training after secondary school, but I prefer HE because it is more familiar. I am mindful of the perception that HE is mainly university-based education and, indeed, many of the examples in the book refer to universities. However, I attempted to include colleges and vocational training institutions in Chapter 2 and, as far as observations about the social nature of learning and the extent of multilingualism in post-school education are concerned, all HE institutions (HEIs) are assumed to be concerned with the promotion of student success.
- *Globalisation*: This term is used in the market economy sense and particularly in the context of neoliberal discourses about HE. References to HE as a commodity and academics (including students) as tradable products form part of this discourse.
- *Internationalisation* refers to the international exchange of students and academics as the continuation of a centuries-old tradition, which now includes possibilities of virtual collaborative research and teaching and dual-degree programmes, among others.

Although the last two terms cannot always be disentangled, I agree with Altman and Knight (2007: 291) that '[g]lobalization may be unalterable, but internationalization involves many choices'. I strongly endorse their conclusion that 'today's emerging programs and practices must ensure that international higher education benefits the public and not simply be a profit center' (Altman & Knight 2007: 304). This view of internationalisation is to be inferred when the term is used in this book, without losing sight of its liberal, market-related link to globalisation and the criticism by Scott (2000: 4) that the use of *internationalisation*, in the 21st century, 'conjures up a world of diplomatic exchanges and international agencies in which the interests of ex-colonial and great powers still linger'.

- The term *student* is used to refer to HE students and the term *learners* to refer to students at school level. This distinction is necessary because bi-/multilingual education is still seen as a 'schooling' practice and research on bi-/multilingual teaching and learning is done mostly at school level. The distinction also becomes important when discussing the application of school practices to HE.
- The term *multilingual* education will include officially *bi*lingual institutions, unless a specific point is made about bilingual education. Even officially bilingual institutions may have some faculties that are introducing a third language, for example, the University of Fribourg, which is introducing English in addition to German and French. Moreover, the existence of an officially bilingual language policy does not mean that no other languages are used for learning and teaching purposes.
- *Minoritised* is the term used to refer to languages and communities that are generally perceived to be disadvantaged in terms of social recognition. There are many reasons for such perceptions; a language could be minoritised because of the recent immigrant status of its speakers (e.g. Xhosa in Germany), but the same language is minoritised in South African education despite its official status and its number of speakers because the language may not be regarded as suitable for secondary or HE teaching (see later on in this chapter). The term indicates that minority status is not a property of a community or a language, but is assigned to it.

A Multilingual Perspective on Learning: Language as a Resource

It is generally accepted that there are more multilingual than monolingual individuals worldwide (Romaine, 2008). Aronin and Singleton (2008) argue that the scale and significance of multilingualism can be linked to 'dramatic social changes' (2008: 1) that characterise globalisation. Although their claim for the uniqueness of the current sociolinguistic landscape (in terms of its multilingual nature) may be overstated – multilingualism has been a feature of African and Indian societies for centuries – the degree to which multilinguals are able to interact physically and virtually can be seen as unprecedented. However, not all forms of multilingualism are necessarily valued equally highly. In Chapter 2, the point is made that English-plus multilingualism is becoming the norm for multilingual individuals and, generally speaking, the inclusion of high-status languages will be seen as constituting a more valuable multilingual repertoire, one that is mostly available for elites and their children (Nelde, 1991: 69). Research done in such educational environments has been presented as models for teaching colonial languages to African communities where multilinguals use minoritised languages, with disastrous consequences (Brock-Utne, 2009).

New conceptions of multilingualism

When do we call ourselves bi- or multilingual? I regularly ask students this question when they plot their language biographies. Although some of them grew up using Cape Flats Afrikaans, this variety of Afrikaans has never appeared on their biographies. Similarly, students would not consider their basic knowledge of Xhosa or German, which many would have encountered at school or undergraduate level, as evidence of their being multilingual. The idea of 'balanced bilingualism', that is, the ability to use languages equally well in all domains and modes, is pervasive and seen as the ultimate target for bi-/multilinguals.

Emerging research done in Europe on third-language acquisition and its implications for multilingual education (Jessner, 2008: 45) indicates that comfortable assumptions about learners or students developing mirror competencies in two languages that are kept strictly separate do not correspond to the language use and practices of bi- or multilinguals. From such a monolingual perspective, bi- and trilingual people are perceived as two or three monolinguals in one, who add languages one by one to a fully formed 'mother tongue'. The reality is far more complex, with multilinguals developing a repertoire of language practices, and becoming 'competent but specific speaker-hearers' (Jessner, 2008: 20). This is clearly illustrated in Ouane's (2009: 53) description of what he calls an African multilingualism:

> [I]n some places in Africa or India, a child can grow up with up to six languages at the same time. Each of these languages represents a different part of the culture in these areas. Cultural identity has several markers at various levels from local to community, national and even international. Each layer could be reflected or carried by a language in a multilingual set-up.

From the perspective of a *constellation* of languages (see the section 'Context' above), Ouane (2009: 59) criticises the 'monolingual, compartmentalising habitus' of Western theories of bilingualism and bilingual education, which do not take everyday practices of language mediation and translation into account. By keeping languages apart, Ouane argues, the monolingual view of teaching and curricula '[leads] to a dead end and inhibits its [multilingualism's] further expansion' (Ouane, 2009: 59).

Instead, Herdina and Jessner (2002: 151) argue, we need a dynamic systems model of multilingualism to explain the psycholinguistic processes and to underpin empirical investigations into particular instances of multilingualism. Although they admit that research into the psycholinguistics of multilingualism is still in its infancy, a dynamic systems model is hoped to 'provide an innovative theoretical framework in which it is possible to ask meaningful questions concerning multilingual development to obtain more satisfactory answers to the plethora of questions surrounding multilingualism as a psycholinguistic phenomenon with sociolinguistic consequences' (Herdina & Jessner, 2002: 152).

Multilingualism in education

Dominant paradigms of foreign language teaching are largely to blame for the tradition of keeping learners' existing languages apart from the target language. The fear of 'negative interference' from the home and other languages leads to punitive practices, for example, making learners pay fines when they use their home language in a foreign language class. Perceptions of code switching as a sign of limited language proficiency or as undesirable in educational contexts (see Chapter 4), particularly in language teaching classes, have spilled over into content subject teaching. The existence of other languages is constructed as undesirable and problematic.

In an analysis of language in education policies in the USA, Ruiz (1994) compares a language-as-resource paradigm to (among others) that of language-as-a-problem. In the case of a language-as-resource paradigm, the existence of many languages in a particular community is seen as supportive of learning and teaching. In the case of a language-as-problem paradigm, multilingual students are constructed as lacking certain skills and competencies and therefore needing special programmes or interventions. This orientation has led to the development of English for academic purposes programmes and, more recently, programmes in academic literacy, as discussed in Chapter 3. Ouane's view adds a dimension to the language as a resource paradigm by arguing that not only language but multilingual competence itself are resources.

García (2009: 7) emphasises that 'bilingual education is not simply about *one language plus a second language equals two languages*' (her emphasis), but that students use a multiplicity of language practices, in different modes, calling on their available languages as well as varieties of languages to manage their learning and achieve their goals. For example, receptive proficiency in one language does not preclude its use in education, because a more nuanced view of multilingualism (as argued later on) means that listening in one language and writing in another exploit the individual's repertoire of language use (as argued in Chapters 3 and 4). This view extends the language-as-resource paradigm to bilingual education, and links up with a view of multilingual communication as a dynamic and recursive process. García's image (2009: 8) of bilingual education as an all-terrain vehicle rather than a bicycle is striking in this regard and links up with Canagarajah's (2011: 403) view of multilingual language practices as codemeshing. He contrasts this idea with more traditional views: 'Whereas code switching treats language alternation as involving bilingual competence and switches between two different systems, codemeshing treats the languages as part of a single integrated system'.

As educators and language teachers, we need to emphasise, and do so repeatedly, that a focus in education on the use of one particular language (and only very specific forms and registers of that language at that) is a violation of social justice, effective learning and access to knowledge (Skutnab-Kangas *et al*., 2009). When students are discouraged from using the languages

at their disposal for learning, either actively or merely by pretending that other languages do not exist, they are deprived of practices and tools that they can access and mobilise with relative ease. Furthermore, students who use the LoLT as an additional language are often put through entry or placement tests such as the International English Language Testing System or the standardized tests used in the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) framework. The languages that they bring with them and which may have helped them gain access to HE disappear in the process of these students being classified as 'second language students' or 'international students' or 'academic support students'. Chapter 3 will show that students' struggle to be successful in HE is often constructed as an inability to use the LoLT well. Although proficiency in the LoLT is a legitimate concern in HE, minority, transnationally mobile (the term proposed by Haberland & Risager (2008: 42) for 'international' or 'foreign' students) or first-generation students' feelings of alienation cannot be ascribed merely to lack of proficiency in the LoLT. As Boughey (2002: 305) notes, 'the 'naming' of students' language-related experiences, and the initiatives intended to remediate the problems which result from that 'naming', require further interrogation if epistemological access is to be granted'. HE practitioners often reduce learning to the mastery of certain forms of language use by merely offering 'academic support' or 'academic writing courses'. When such 'interventions' are imposed on students who have successfully gained access to HE based on prior performance in another language, a monolingual focus becomes particularly problematic.

For me, as a researcher in a multilingual community and a citizen of a country that acknowledges 11 official languages, an orientation that sees language-as-a-resource is natural, even normative, although such a view may not be widespread. However, the orientation towards language-as-a-resource is not as unproblematic as it may sound. It is more than the trite statement, 'It's not a problem, it's a challenge!' and far more than the warm glow of political correctness when people proclaim the advantages of multilingualism while expressing mock modesty at their own lack of knowing more than English. When language is seen as a resource for bi-/multilinguals only, the language-as-a-resource paradigm runs the risk of being contaminated by what Torres-Guzmán (2007: 54) calls a view of bi-/multilingualism as a compensatory strategy rather than 'a socially desirable commodity'. This point is important for my argument: a (low-status) language is not merely a bridge or a support for another (high-status, academic) language; community languages contextualise and feed HE in very real ways – they form part of the 'common space' identified by Ouane (2009: 57). When students from a community surrounding the HEI enrol for courses and programmes, they provide the lifeblood of that institution. When students graduate, they go back into a variety of communities where they have to interact in a variety of languages, serving a community that supported their training in different ways.

My own perspective on the language-as-a-resource orientation is shaped by Torres-Guzmán's view, particularly when she links the societal value of