Language development in higher education: Suggested paradigms and their applications in South Africa

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the current global recession, it is argued that strategic literacy development and diversity management may act as a buffer against the deepening impact of the existing and widening crisis of inequities in education in South Africa. With reference to youth studies, a link is made between identity and literacy as important cultural capital. This requires re-mediation of language development offerings, which are often based on outdated assumptions that participants are monolinguals who share the language and discourses of the institution. The author of this article suggests a shift towards learning ecologies which are designed to embrace linguistic diversity and that the following paradigms should be applied: linking institutional literacies to social change, conceiving of curriculum design as a means for creative opportunity, subscribing to critical approaches to literacy, linking student language development to the institutional diversity management strategy, and affirming linguistic hybridity within the institution. Finally, this paper presents an integrated strategy for maximising student language development based on an inclusive curriculum model that is compliant with the requirements of a linguistically diverse student population.

Challenges facing language development practitioners in higher education

Prominent literacy challenges in South Africa, such as the conundrum of continued unequal allocation of resources, the ineffective application of language policy, the importation of Western notions of reading into a bookless landscape, and the absence of ‘political will’ to address these factors as a matter of priority, have persisted despite the change of government in 1994. All of these challenges have been further amplified by the current global recession. While technology has indeed changed the world, it does not replace the need for mediation of academic and linguistic practices in education. Linguistic diversity is the norm in South Africa and no core body of linguistic knowledge and meta-knowledge in any given language of education can be assumed. This raises questions around method of presentation of mainstream disciplinary teaching material as well as the mediation of language development practices in higher education. The previously fairly straightforward presentation of course material, geared for largely monolingual student bodies, is inadequate in interfacing with the multiliterate discourses of students and lecturers in the system and the varied expectations on the part of the lecturers and students which this brings with it.

Overall aims in higher education in South Africa are succinctly summarised by Professor Njabulo Ndebele (2009: 13) in the extract quoted below from his speech delivered at the 20th Sunday Times Literary Award in Johannesburg on 1 August 2009:

Clearly, we cannot go through this radically formative period in our history without learning to re-imagine ourselves and our country. That is why the ‘DVD’ of our behind-the-scenes struggles must be played all the time. That way we grow our collective imagination.

and

Let’s submit to the imperative of intelligent, creative, ethical and resourceful public institutions.

According to Bakhtin’s dialogic perspective (cited in Abasi & Akbari, 2008), academic practice includes particular ways of thinking, acting, believing and speaking which are not automatically
acquired. Students write what they think the lecturer wants to read and try to gauge and anticipate lecturers’ potential responses. This was evident in a comment by one of the students in a course evaluation in Canada (Amorita’s interview, November 2005, cited in Abasi & Akbari, 2008: 277):

He [i.e., the professor] is always there at the back of my mind, because he is the only one who’s gonna evaluate me; … so I look at the outline, and yeah, he is there like a God in my mind, and it’s scary.

What this quotation illustrates is the extent to which studies in other parts of the world, reveal similar impacts of demographic shifts on challenges in language education to those experienced in South Africa. Lecturers maintain that students, who are told to make claims, substantiate them, and then illustrate what they mean, litter their writing with quotations from preferred, esteemed sources. Lecturers may, however, not be explicit enough when it comes to what exactly they want students to do when they write. The end result often does not match what the lecturer had in mind. What is handed in is widely divergent and often unpredictable, but categories, such as the distinction between localised and globalised patchwriting (Abasi & Akbari, 2008), are useful in helping to ascertain to what degree student writing meets institutionalised criteria:

- Localised patchwriting, i.e. essays containing heavily borrowed language, bordering on ‘plagiarism’.
- Globalised patchwriting, i.e. sweeping statements, derivative views, lots of quoted material, but no integration with the student’s own text.

What is generally required of students is re-voiced source material, critical engagement, a statement of their own views, an integrated form of knowledge display and knowledge acquisition, and a strongly developed sense of the student’s own voice. However, students are often not encouraged to talk with informed voices and some authority. They should respond by deeply processing all perspectives on an issue and showing their understanding in relation to the authoritative material provided. The challenge is to strike a good balance between students as consumers of ready-made ideas and students as apprentice critics of ideas to which they are exposed. Language practitioners in higher education ought to contribute to building a more equitable society in which a sense of agency ought to be one of the main outcomes of language development in higher education.

In this article, I argue that certain paradigms should apply, namely, linking institutional literacies to social change, conceiving of curriculum design as a creative opportunity, subscribing to critical approaches to literacy, linking student language development to the institutional diversity management strategy, and affirming linguistic hybridity within the institution.

**Linking institutional literacies to social change**

A common assumption is that students will automatically and unconsciously be empowered by what happens in institutions. This is not necessarily the case:

A more sophisticated sociological and economic analysis would shape educational policy as a subset of larger policies of social justice and economic independence. The effect is to place a caveat under the ‘myth’ that the improvement of pedagogy, curriculum and student performance on a range of measures in and of themselves can have sustainable and meaningful consequences in people’s trajectories across highly unstable and volatile, structurally unequal and asymmetrical social fields of exchange (Luke, 2008: 677).

Linking institutionalised literacies to tangible economic rewards is the ultimate challenge. Luke (2008: 678) maintained that Bernstein’s (1972) controversial claim, made 30 years ago, that ‘education cannot compensate for society’, … is a reminder that other kinds of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital need to be put into play before the full value of educationally acquired capital can be realised. Schools have the power to open access to dominant cultural capital through the curriculum and languages that they offer. It is established that particular forms of pedagogy that recognise difference and systematically bridge students’ existing cultural capital with the mainstream forms of English language and literacy can indeed improve the acquisition of institutional capital.
Suárez-Orozco and Sattin (2007: 19), similarly, pointed out that:

The skills, sensibilities, and competencies needed for identifying, analyzing, and solving problems from multiple perspectives will require nurturing students who are curious and cognitively flexible, can tolerate ambiguity, and can synthesize knowledge within and across disciplines. They will need the cultural sophistication to empathize with their peers, who will likely be of different racial, religious, linguistic and social origins. They will need to be able to learn with and from them, to work collaboratively and communicate effectively in groups made up of diverse individuals. An education for globalization should aim at nothing more nor less than to educate the whole child for the whole world.

In order to achieve what Suárez-Orozco and Sattin (2007) have suggested, language development needs to be fully integrated into the mainstream inquiry-based pedagogy, recognising disciplinary-based constructed knowledge that needs to be mediated as well as modified. Leki (2007) proposed socio-academic framing of educational research, that is, ethnographies of student social networks and their reading and writing histories. The proposal is to broaden the scope of research by delving more deeply into the wider constellations of experiences and conditions impacting on participants’ literacies (as opposed to strictly their writing) development across their experiences in different courses and different learning contexts, because language development and agency do not emerge through writing in a structured university lecture hall or a tutorial alone. They are enacted and performed in all domains of the life of the individual. By focusing on the so-called ‘inadequacies’ of the student’s work in relation to imposed norms, the identity of the learner is discounted, or worse, negated. At best, the student can learn how to pass while bypassing being ‘educated’.

**Conceiving of curriculum design as creative opportunity**

A thick description of the trajectories shaping the lecture room and general institutional communication provides insights into the possible nature of learning for migrating world populations, with shifting conceptions of margins and centres.

Student and community-based discourses need to be embraced and included in such a way that curriculum becomes a set of creative opportunities. Cummins (2007) advocated the inclusion of minority and immigrant languages in the classroom and provides evidence for the notion that policies of immersion and simultaneous bilingualism have some important linguistic and cognitive advantages. Significant positive relationships are formed in the classroom where no one is marginalised. Furthermore, the inclusion of minority or marginal languages facilitates understanding between cultures, with positive spin-offs for community building. It goes without saying that fluency and competence in the dominant language of trade and commerce is to be promoted alongside community languages.

Cummins’s (2007) model of immersion is based on the recognition of a common underlying language proficiency which can be accessed through both languages of the bilingual speaker, which is reminiscent of Chomsky’s ‘universal grammar’. The second principle to note is that prior knowledge is important, is embedded in the speaker’s first language, and can be accessed and used in the immersion context towards acquisition of the language of power and learning, which, in our case, is English. Cummins (2007) further put forward strong arguments for the notion that effective bilingual education challenges coercive power relations in broader society by affirming students’ identities within the institution. He cited much evidence from Poplin and Weeres (1992) and Bishop and Berryman (2006), which strongly supported his point that students who experience academic failure predominantly come from social groups whose identities, cultures, languages and religions have been devalued, sometimes for many generations.

Gee’s theory in relation to this is as follows:

*For almost any domain, then, we can trace out what I will call ‘a resource precursor trajectory’ (‘RPT’ for short). An RPT for a given semiotic domain is the set of all semiotic domains that contain elements or are associated with affinity groups that facilitate mastering that given domain. We can define ‘advantaged’ and ‘disadvantaged’ learners in terms of this notion of RPT … We can define an ‘advantaged learner’ (the ‘well precursed’ learner) for...*
any given semiotic domain as a learner whose actual history has seriously and fruitfully engaged with a good deal of the RPT for that domain (of course, not necessarily perfectly) (Gee, cited in Prinsloo & Baynham, 2008: 8).

Gee (2008) explained that a disadvantaged learner (the ‘poorly precursed’ learner) is one whose actual history has not seriously and fruitfully engaged with a good deal of the RPT (i.e. the dominant discourse conventions) for that domain. He, of course, meant a continuum, rather than a clear binary distinction. Thus, we can talk about degrees of advantage and disadvantage. Gee (2008) goes on to explain that children who come to school looking ‘behind’, have often been (and are) immersed in semiotic domains in their social environment that are not fruitfully networked (by teachers) to school-based semiotic domains. Furthermore, they are not introduced in an ongoing fashion to other precursor domains, in and out of school, that will facilitate success in discipline-specific areas of schooling. It is simply a matter of the ways in which the learner’s history does or does not reflect access to and engagement with the RPT of the new domain. Gee (2008: 8) also claimed that ‘[w]e need to acknowledge that other people (such as teachers) and institutions can affect, in a myriad of different ways, how and whether a learner is able and willing to pay the entry price into a given semiotic domain’. Therefore, it is not about learning English, but whether one has learnt to ‘perform’ in English in very specific academic domains, for instance Engineering, Law, Commerce, or Health Sciences. To speak of ‘academic skills’ as something fuzzy and purely generic does not adequately address the need for structured and directed acquisition of the language of learning. Similar to the marketing strategy of a commercial company, where the outward-bound discourses have to be client-directed, designed to match the clients’ discourses, so too do education discourses need to match the discourses of the students, while at the same time extending those discourses to match those semiotic domains which can provide ‘fruitful extensions of the core self’, according to Gee (2008). Those are the domains which will be to their economic interest and long-term benefit.

Standardised linguistic protocols alone are not adequate training material (Vincent, 2005). Vincent (2005) emphasised the role of creative collaboration and multimodality. For example, the introduction of technological tools allows for alternative ways of expression and the possibility of reducing the disadvantages that additional-language users face. It has been adequately demonstrated over and over that allowing students to express their ability in ways that suit them, given that a range of options are presented, enhances their self-belief and confidence. This can be illustrated with reference to the case of Brown Paper Studio.

Brown Paper Studio was a three-way partnership between an English Department-based script-writing Honour’s module, an on-campus theatre training project and a theatre training project in a nearby school. University student volunteers would train once a week and mentor the learners at the school once a week. The aim of Brown Paper Studio was to promote cross-cultural engagement and understanding amongst youth who are severely at risk and culturally alienated from each other. Mitchell’s Plain is notorious for its high levels of poverty, alcoholism, gangsterism, and crime. Cape Town is also the South African city with the highest levels of violence perpetrated both against and by the youth (Ward et al., 2001).

The research was conducted at Glendale High School. Fifteen learners participated in a survey regarding the effect of the theatre training on their own lives. They indicated that they are, to a large extent, dependent on themselves and each other for support and guidance, which reveals that strong peer group networks are an essential ingredient of psychosocial well-being in the context under discussion. How this plays itself out in their social lives, was part of what the self-portrait project tried to document. Learners were drawn into the research process through the production of a series of self-reflective ‘artifacts’.

Data were collected over a period of six weeks in November and December 2006. In a workshop, learners were given brown paper bags, stationery, exercise books that would serve as diaries, and disposable cameras. It was explained to them that they were to create ‘self-portrait’ bags. Each learner could decorate his or her bags and fill them with a variety of articles that they felt represented themselves and their community. Learners were encouraged to express themselves in any language they felt comfortable in. In addition, they were told to ‘write as you speak’. The idea behind this is to capture spontaneous conversational discourses as closely as possible. Six weeks
later the learners were asked to present their bags to the group. This was followed up by question-
naires designed to lend deeper insights into their lives, with the possibility of tracing accumulative
emerging narratives. In yet another workshop, interviews were conducted with learners to identify
closer correlations between particular theatre training events they had been exposed to and positive
spin-offs as perceived by them.

Two research assistants, who at the time were also youth mentors, theatre trainers, students
and artists, claimed that the most significant aspect of the Brown Paper Studio project was critical
awareness and making informed decisions about ‘the self’ and linking that to the community as well
as individual goals and dreams. They wrote:

Creativity is a stage on which the individual can create individual philosophies to govern
the self. Through creativity an individual can ponder his or her community values, despite
the community being the only frame of reference … The Glendale students are a testament
of the impact which sincere collective creativity can produce. The goal of Brown Paper
Studio is not for those who participate to create meta-philosophies in the mystical realm or
historically renowned meta-philosophies, but rather to engage with self-generated factors to
govern oneself within a collective or community (Hibbert et al., 2009: 14).

This alerts us to the following key issues in social transformation. Firstly, accommodationist ‘add
on’ paradigms for social and educational change can end up being largely cosmetic. They do not
contribute to deep surface transformation of power relations. This is because historically constructed
barriers between mainstream and so-called marginal communities are artificially induced to benefit
certain sectors. Secondly, inserting the voice of youth into the debate, and locating the debate at
the interface of exchanges between mainstream and marginal populations, creates platforms for
increased equitable exchange of information and ideas. Thirdly, Tembu and Tsotsi’s (in Hibbert
et al., 2009) main point is that creativity is a ‘moral imperative’. Rather than looking for ‘solutions’
regarding how to remedy, cure or eradicate ‘bad’ English, it may be most useful to continue to read
trends and identify the possibilities of what the interventions are actually achieving. This may be
regarded as unquantifiable in the pure sense, but does provide strong pointers to the nature of the
mismatch between institutional requirements and social literacies. In summary then, youth studies
highlight the importance of creativity, self-reflectivity, and collaboration and thus the importance of
re-alignment on the part of institutions. This supports my argument that the difficult task of language
practitioners is to bridge the linguistic schisms between practices in higher education and communi-
ties of practice in the world of work.

Subscribing to critical approaches to literacy

The use of the word ‘critical’ signals a focus on power and ‘signals a move to question the natural-
ized assumptions of the discipline, its truths, its discourses and its attendant practices’ (Janks,
2010: 12). This entails, initially, basic speaking, reading and writing abilities in both languages, the
language of learning and the speaker’s own language. It is preferable if the deep structures of either
of these languages are acquired early on in life. Such a move entails, firstly, substantial exposure to
‘standardised’ forms of interactions in the language of learning. Secondly, it entails exposure to and
practice in the ‘design grammars’ (Gee, 2008) of academic and other genres.

Students need to be explicitly taught the features of ‘standard’ or ‘good English’, but that is not
enough (Schleppgrell & Colombi, 2002). Model forms of ‘good’ English need to be qualified, and
need to be looked at in contrast to parallel variants, dialects and localised versions. Alongside this
specialist instruction, language awareness and metalinguistic activity are regarded as essential,
and exposure to and interactions with English speakers, together with basic speaking and reading
abilities in English, are a prerequisite, as are sophisticated metalinguistic skills in the learner’s
own language. For this purpose, advanced literacy competency should be explicitly taught, and
elements given of expressions in both languages and cultures: the language of the institution and
the primary language of the student.

Thirdly, since written texts are lexically denser than spoken language, students should be
engaged in comparative analysis to show how written genres are lexically divergent. This would
mean alerting students to the fact that preferred ‘models’ of disciplinary discourses exist, and the
need to critically analyse the formal features of these models to learn how they are constructed in order to engage with them dialogically. A metalinguistic inquiry-based curriculum would expect students to perform, broadly speaking, in the following areas of expertise:

• Being able to identify ‘standard written forms’ from linguistic style fusions which represent the hybrid identities that typify most people in the global migratory world.

• Identifying culturally embedded points of view and frames of reference in their own discourses and reflecting on the origins and impacts of re-contextualised discourses on their identity and the identity of others. This would entail making informed linguistic choices (Loveless, 2006). Students from privileged communities would also learn to critically examine the hidden contradictions and ideologies of their own cultural world views (Siegel, 2006).

• Identifying and being able to interpret ‘foreign’ discourses embedded in their own and in the discourses of others and translating these into their own words, which would include translating unfamiliar and foreign discourses into their own words. This could also entail translating texts from one language to another.

The polyphonic workplace (this refers to different languages as well different dialects and differently pronounced versions of standard English) requires sharpened interpretative skills because of the vast number of divergent indexical meanings packaged into one speech event. Interpretive frames, which are reliant on past experience, differ greatly from one individual to the next. Furthermore, a vast amount of negotiation of meaning is required by interlocutors in cross-cultural communication to bring their interpretive frames into alignment to reach understandings. The curriculum could therefore include items such as refining of listening strategies through experimentation with different meeting styles, marketing styles and net-based marketing strategies. Awareness of the origins of ‘ways of speaking’ of the other communicative participants places divergent forms of speech at the centre of learning about language and about each other. In terms of curriculum design, this would require expanded time being allocated to negotiating common understandings of what is being expressed by the various parties.

The voice of de-contextualised rationality, which is acquired through the de-contextualised uses of language in institutional settings, particularly in formal contexts such as institutions, excludes newcomers. A key factor here is the notion that all language is infused with multiple voices:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others.

Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions, is a difficult and complicated process (Cazden, 1992: 198).

Thus, accepting a curriculum framework that embraces multiple literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) means acknowledging an infinite number of previously acquired discourses which people bring into both work and educational settings. Engagement with a variety of languages, discourses, styles and approaches offers students the opportunity for reflection and assists in the development of meta-cognitive and metalinguistic abilities (New London Group, 1996). Competence in these abilities not only suggests advantages for students inside the classroom but also for ‘real life’ communication, where interaction between interlocutors from diverse backgrounds requires a strong sense of agency and confidence in negotiating meaning making. Bilingual and multilingual, multimodal cultural identities would emerge if students were to be encouraged to be innovative in expressing themselves. If students were to produce texts which could be regarded as ‘style fusions’, albeit within discipline-specific prescribed genres, they would be well on their way towards becoming agents of change. For students currently attending university on the African continent, and who are from previously marginalised groups, this kind of activity should be high on the teaching agenda and, as already outlined, constitutes the greatest challenge. The most comprehensive current theoretical overview with further sample applications of critical linguistic practices in education in South African can be found in Janks (2010).

**Linking language development strategies to institutional diversity management agendas**

The shift in educational policy from the negatively framed ‘deficit’ model to ‘re-mediation’ (Gutiérrez et al., 2009: 227) is evident in much of the literature dealing with language of education issues in
all parts of the world where linguistic diversity is becoming the norm and English is the perceived language of power. Re-mediation would entail taking a different perspective on students from language and cultural groups other than white Anglophone, Anglicised groups, by focusing on the responsibility of the institution to provide processes of educational mediation, rather than on viewing youth outside of the middle class, so-called ‘normal’ band of learners as marginal, deviant and pathological (Gutiérrez et al., 2009). More specifically, re-mediation entails designing learning ecologies for collective activity (Gutiérrez et al., 2009) and ‘moving across zones of proximal development’ (Engeström, 1999: 3). This activity-theoretical approach, based on a Vygotskian approach, is named re-mediation and is explained by Engeström and Engeström (1986) as re-mediation design, engaging in critique as well as extension of knowledge, through active text production, performance, interaction, critique and cultural inclusivity. In South Africa, the inclusion of indigenous knowledge structures and discourse practices is dealt with by incorporating ethical ways of implementing black economic empowerment and affirmative action within the classroom structure in order to create an equitable space for all voices.

Instruction involving multiliteracies promotes respect for non-mainstream learners and their input into and participation in class (Walsh & Albright, 2006). Multiliteracies present an opportunity to portray one’s culture without hindrance from the dominant culture, an opportunity that is not necessarily automatically available. Table 1 indicates the suggested switch in conceptual framework from traditional to inclusive curriculum models that are compliant with the requirements of a linguistically diverse student population.

In practical terms, an example of the above could be as follows. I recommend an open but structured discussion of a ‘burning issue’ in the form of a talk show instead of giving a formal lecture. Following this, students are asked where they stand in relation to the issue under discussion. A manageable, volume-reduced, reading load is prescribed, in order to enhance deep processing. Initially, for first-year students, the often heavy emphasis on writing criteria needs to be downplayed. Equal emphasis ought to be placed on knowledge giving and knowledge transformation early on in the courses. Awareness of the difference also needs to be made explicit at the onset. This is done through exposure to classroom-based collaborative deconstruction of published articles and other literature in the field, early on in the courses. Such exercises emphasise the requirements of professional practices in the academic field. Students are exposed early on in the course to the preferred writing practices and their criteria, to the fact that they are indeed privileged and rewarded in the institution. Language development practitioners in higher education need to view themselves as mediators of discourse practices, and as linguistic mentors for students who

Table 1: Traditional versus diversity complaint models of curriculum transformation (Hibbert, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transforming the curriculum</th>
<th>from a traditional model, to ...</th>
<th>... a diversity compliant inclusive model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Focus on correctness and preferred knowledge, attitudes and beliefs</td>
<td>Focus on discourse as socially constituted and constituting, and focus on classroom community building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Focus on transmission of only ‘vacuum-packed knowledge bites’; Text consumption only</td>
<td>Critical engagement and active text production; Strong performance orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Unidirectional communication; monologue</td>
<td>Dialectical; interactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Discrete skills taught as a ‘list’ out of context</td>
<td>Context-embedded critical enquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Monomodal</td>
<td>Multimodal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Monoliterate, monolingual</td>
<td>Multiliterate, multilingual, cross-cultural competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>A monolingual classroom culture; dominant-culture focused</td>
<td>Taking account of the wider multilingual context; diversity-focused classroom cultures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
are grappling with institutional demands and cultures. Language development lecturers ought to teach with the aim of transference of skills in mind. Students need to be led to understand how the linguistic skills they are acquiring in higher education have currency elsewhere. While language skills are designated to isolated add-on communication courses, what students learn will not transfer by default to mainstream academic writing or into the workplace some three years later.

Students need to be viewed as assets to the institution, and as change agents, as apprentice practitioners, writers and co-researchers and full participants who learn to become team players in active community-building tutorials. Tembu and Tsotsi (in Hibbert et al., 2009) pointed to the way agency begins with community cohesion and the formation of ‘alternative normativity’ (Fataar, 2006: 611), which refers to socially responsive identities adopted by educators who are sensitive to the context of learners’ lives. In terms of a paradigm shift, a move away from the ‘deficit’ model is needed, as well as the notion of stigmatising those we see as ‘lacking’ something in terms of linguistic expertise. Language development practitioners need to face the challenges of how to interact sensibly with the increasingly diverse student body, whose hybrid identities, as well as their own, are not easily defined and included in critical linguistic activity.

All aspects of the institution need to be targeted for transformation, not only the students. Addressing lecturer, student and institutional perspectives and attitudes through an analysis of the entire context, and all interactions within it, is essential. Institutions of higher learning in South Africa should be conceived of as social welfare support systems. They should contribute to building local economic and social networks and to improving pan-African communication and commerce, making visible contributions to social development in the province and the region. This could be done by taking NRF project funding to areas where, according to the daily local press, rape statistics are rising at an alarming rate and gangsterism rules. If language development is placed at the centre of the first-year curriculum in each faculty, with a team of discipline specific lecturers and tutor or mentors, and the impact is measured, something would emerge that moves closer to ‘an answer’ to all our questions regarding building a new society.

**Affirming linguistic hybridity within the institution**

In ethnographies of communication, literacy is increasingly linked to theories of performativity (Duranti, 2008). Anthropological enquiry into educational processes currently interrogates and interprets the role of aesthetics in youths’ lives. It also encourages critical agency relating to questions of local and global citizenship. Current anthropological ethnography recognises the need for cosmopolitanism, the ever-alertness to our obligations to ‘others’, as advocated by Appiah (2006) and also Benhabib (2002). Educational enquiry of this nature enables a move away from the focus on the bleak pasts and futures of the so-called ‘marginal’, in which young people are characterised as not measuring up.

A wide variety of initiatives addressing the challenges of linguistic hybridity in South African institutions of higher learning can be found in the current literature. Many of these initiatives address the question of the viability of including African languages as languages of learning and teaching, or at the very least address the issue of taking cognizance of the home language of the students. For example, De Kadt and Mathonsi’s (2003) research addresses the issue of students speaking English with an African voice, and the degree to which academic staff are positioned to be able to relate to this. Ramani and Joseph (2006) discuss the production of glossaries and the use of African languages to enhance pedagogic processes and cognition at the University of Limpopo. Further studies on this issue have been conducted at the University of Cape Town (Bangani & Kapp, 2005; Paxton, 2009). The issue of code-switching and use of multiple languages in higher education pedagogy has been addressed by Terzoli et al. (2005) with reference to Rhodes University and Deyi et al. (2007) with reference to the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The need for language development of academic and administrative staff, in terms of enhanced cross-cultural communication strategies, has also emerged as an issue to be addressed. All the experimental research represented in the current literature, supports some aspects of the multilingual and multimodal model suggested in this paper. However, most of the initiatives are driven from ‘below’ and initiated through the use of outside funding. No complete survey of multilingual and multimodal
language development initiatives at South African universities is yet available. It is therefore difficult to assess to what degree the findings so far suggest any clear distinction between ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ strategies, or to what degree a clear formulation of generic guidelines is possible.

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) in Port Elizabeth, like many other universities in South Africa, provides clear guidance in relation to the issue of cultural and linguistic inclusivity in its Refined Vision 2020 Directional Statement of 18 August 2009:

*We adopt a humanizing pedagogical approach that respects and acknowledges diverse knowledge traditions and engages them in critical dialogue in order to nurture a participative approach to problem-posing and problem-solving, and the ability to contribute to a multi-cultural society … and infuse humanizing pedagogic approaches in all academic programmes in order to liberate the full potential of students from diverse backgrounds with varying levels of academic preparedness (NMMU, 2009: 3).*

Language development in higher education is best addressed by viewing it as part of existing institutionalised diversity management and community-building strategy. In South Africa, multiple discourses impact on institutional domains of practice, and many languages and variants of those languages co-exist in some form or another. For decades, the onus has been on the learners to negotiate a cacophony of discourses, with no recognition of responsibility on the part of educators to repackage their goods and to examine their perceptions of, and positions in relation to, the way they conceive of the identity of their students. An institutional language policy can be informed by a variety of different perspectives. For instance, a monolingual perspective would mean exchanging the language of learning and teaching for another one. For instance, the language of learning and teaching would be isiXhosa, instead of English. However, in terms of global economics, that may be too simplistic and inward-looking.

Secondly, an accommodationist stance would imply trying to please everyone. This may result in nothing more than a symbolic gesture. It could also be perceived as patronising and pandering to particular language groups because of misguided human rights stances. This, too, might end up being purely symbolic, with no real strategic implementation plan, because of lack of real information on what may really be in the interest of the students’ economic futures.

Thirdly, research-informed decisions about communities of practice on the ground could uncover how local demographics and global linguistic trends interface. However, it must be kept in mind that scientific approaches and discourses are, in all cases, based on ideological frameworks and perspectives.

The problem with implementation of successful multilingual policy stems from the absence of multiple, variable, deeply processed scientific data on community profiles, within the university as well as in the region and globally. Political will and emotional energy alone cannot provide the know-how to put economically advantageous language policies into practice. The questions we should be asking are thus: What kinds of needs analysis should been done on the ‘communities of practice’ which represent our staff and our students? How can all of the participants with, in all cases, multiple linguistic identities, be affirmed within the institution to ensure long-term benefits?

One cannot discuss institutional statistics without looking at the students’ demographics alongside the staff demographics. By this I mean accurate statistics on their cultural affiliations, discourse communities, religions, and language usage for different purposes and situations. Variables such as the nature of linguistic hybridity and spontaneous bilingualling need to be described. Most students at NMMU are bilingual, with varying degrees of competence in at least two languages (e.g. isiXhosa and English or English and Afrikaans). All of them would say they are Africans and would be able to qualify exactly what they mean by this, and the answers would be widely divergent. Offensive, outdated entrenched and stigmatised labels still appear all around us. While we all agree that extracting racial statistics is necessary, I suggest, alongside those, detailed language statistics be extracted, reflecting statistics on bilinguals, multilinguals, individuals’ preferred language of learning, and the most used languages of social interaction, albeit specifying how and why and in which contexts languages are actually used.

What, we should ask, are the traditional languages of the home and of the communities which each individual claims membership of, assuming that each individual claims membership of a
variety of communities? This would give us a more accurate description of who we are, who we are dealing with in our student and staff body and the degree to which people no longer subscribe to a colour-only category. Students, for instance, are situated in a very wide range of hybrid global identities. The youth move over trajectories and domains faster than we do because of their age and connectedness to media. They are not only subjected to the ‘Macdonaldisation’ of discourses, but actively use these to enhance their own positions in the social networks within which they seek to gain status. They are good at it. They are resilient. Much of the rap music which we perhaps find difficult to relate to, is shaping global youth culture as we speak and strongly critiques the socio-political status quo, much in the way Bob Dylan’s music did in the 1960s. Students bring hybrid identities into the institution. If these are blocked and labelled and a thick line is drawn between those discourses and those of the institution, students’ hybrid discourses cannot be channelled into discipline-specific critical practices.

If we view the institution within a new capitalist (global) framework, we need to admit that English is the global lingua franca for the foreseeable future, with Arabic, Spanish and Chinese hot on its heels as languages of international trade. At the same time, strong arguments are being made for building local African languages for local economic purposes, a process driven by the African Localisation Project which is supported by a Canadian development organisation. This project is fast putting all minority languages of Africa onto the interface and building lexical banks and enhancing local economic networks, thereby increasing the chances of marginalised communities to connect with the World Wide Web. IsiXhosa, being the major language in the region, can tap into this resource, given the political will, to the benefit of the region. The Eastern Cape is currently the second poorest province in the country, after Limpopo, and can benefit from a strong injection of funding for empowerment projects in the dominant local language.

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