

Language of Instruction in Higher Education: South Africa and Spain

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Introduction

Language is in many ways, a central force for human society, as we depend on language to organize, express, create and interact. Language is a vehicle of knowledge, thus a central piece to academia. Higher education used to be closely tied to a small elite class in society (Marginson 416). People who spoke languages that did not have standardized written forms or active coding of knowledge production were automatically barred from higher education. Since massification of higher education started taking place worldwide, the rapid expansion of higher education institutions is encountering many challenges. Among them, language of instruction (LoI), particularly in multilingual societies, becomes a key component in issues of equity and access, conflicting identities, and forces of globalization and internationalization.

Equity and access are universal issues in higher education in this unequal world. Home languages are often not represented in the public domain. The handover between secondary education and higher education may be inconsistent when LoI differs. Lack of academic proficiency in the socially dominant languages can undermine an individual's mobility and professional opportunities. For example, in India, a country of high linguistic diversity, higher education was entirely taught in English in the 19th century, which effectively prohibited 90% of the population from access (Altbach 258).

Secondly, identity is a matter of concern for non-English speaking countries in an "Anglicizing" higher education sphere. For example, the Netherlands' government had debated several times about whether to change the LoI to English at the undergraduate level. It had been vehemently rejected several times in fear of the Dutch culture and language being potentially marginalized, thus conflicting with a Dutch identity (deWit). Language and identity are not inherent or static but created through interaction and production (Bucholtz & Hall 585). Language is one of the key ways that we produce, project and negotiate our identity. When certain languages are consistently the LoI in higher education, inevitably through the production of knowledge and professional, academic engagements, they will become associated with prestige, the "standard" and the socio-politically powerful varieties that threaten statuses of

other languages and their speakers unless there is conscious effort to counter that force.

Language of instruction, thus, is the language of knowledge and power. It prolongs life and usage of a language first in public domains and then in the entire society possibly making minority languages gradually obsolete. It is then not surprising to see LoI as a point of contention among many national, even regional contexts in presently multilingual societies. On top of the already complex issue, English as a powerful, global and academic language finds its way into these multilingual contexts and raises more questions as internationalization becomes a common objective of many higher education institutions (Altbach 8).

The choice of language of instruction exceeds what is simply practical or of utility. Which group is it practical for? To achieve what ends? Sometimes, educational systems abandon local varieties and favor an outsider language like English to avoid tension between speakers of different languages. At the same time, they hope to gain advantage in the global academic world that operates in English (Altbach 8). Unsurprisingly, using English does not solve domestic ethnic conflicts, either. We have to also consider the factor of language attitudes (Ngcobo 696). How do students *feel* about the fact that English is language of education as opposed to their home language or how do they feel about the alternative? How do students feel towards each other and their professors who have different arrays of linguistic repertoires and accents? How do communities find a common institutional identity facing these attitudes?

This paper presents and discusses two countries on two continents: South Africa and Spain. While the two countries certainly do not represent the larger African and European context, they may reflect some general trends of their respective continents. The following sections will focus on their respective sociolinguistics histories, higher education systems and policy frameworks. We will end with reflections on the implementations of language policies in both contexts and how we may move forward under the blueprint of internationalization.

South Africa

South Africa, like many other African countries, suffered from centuries of Western colonial rule and as a result, English and Afrikaans have been the languages of instruction in higher education. At the same time, the government is sensitive to the relics of colonialism and signs of modern neocolonialism. Therefore, promotion of multilingualism becomes a vehicle of

reparation. However, progressive policies in favor of multilingualism are rarely reflected in the actual practice of universities. Little instruction is done in the home language due to lack of materials or poor quality. Instructors and students often do not share a home language, either (Klapwijk & Van der Walt 68).

After violent contact with the Khoesan and Bantu people, the Dutch people started their settlement in Cape Town in 1652 (Mesthrie 12). Afrikaans originated out of Netherlandish-Dutch and eventually became its own variety. It became recognized as an official language in 1925. It replaced Dutch and was on par with English (Mesthrie 13). The second significant wave of settlers was the British in the early 1800s and English gradually took over Dutch as the language in government and law (Mesthrie 20). English and Afrikaans both became compulsory early on in secondary education for children who speak neither at home (Mesthrie 23).

In the 1990s, post-apartheid South Africa employed very progressive language policies. Eleven languages were recognized with official status: Afrikaans, English, IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, SeSotho, SeSotho sa Lebowa, Setswana, SiSwati, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga (“Pan South African Language Board,”). It is outlined in the Constitution that states are to make progress towards elevating and advancing the African languages (Nudelman 9). Language of instruction across educational institutions became a crucial point of application of multilingualism. It is in principal an opportunity to elevate African languages but there are immense challenges in implementation.

In 2002, of all of the enrolled university students, 32% of students speak English at home and 16% speak Afrikaans at home. These two languages make up the largest groups of home language for university students (“Language Policy for Higher Education”). In other words, more than 50% of university students were not receiving education in their native tongue. Moreover, according to the 2011 census, in the country of South Africa, 22.7% speak IsiZulu as a first language, 16% IsiXhosa, 13.5% Afrikaans and 9.6% English. University students are disproportionately represented by native English-speaking and Afrikaans²-speaking students instead of reflecting the society’s proportion (“Census in Brief 2011,” 23).

The South African government issued the Language Policy for Higher Education in 2002 (abbreviated as LPHE here on) which formally instituted black students’ rights to be educated in African languages when it is “reasonably practicable” as an effort to promote

multilingualism through instilling a sense of pride by using students' first languages in a public and prestigious domain that is higher education (Ngcobo 2014). In 2018, the second iteration of the LPHE was published recognizing that multilingualism is in the decline and many objectives put forward in the 2002 document were not reached. In fact, many language departments in universities have since closed down. English is becoming ever more dominant and present in higher education as major universities announce their transitions into English as language of teaching and learning. ("Revised Language Policy for Higher Education" 2; Stellenbosch University Council 4; Office of the Registrar 2).

While transitioning into English is an effort to more readily interact with the sphere of international higher education, it further perpetuates a racial division. In the census of 2011, 60.8% of whites speak Afrikaans as a first language. 35.9% of whites speak English as a first language. For Black Africans, the percentage is respectively 1.5% and 2.9%. 75.8% of the racial category "colored", which means of mixed racial background, speak Afrikaans as a first language. Almost 50% of Black Africans speak IsiXhosa or IsiZulu as a first language. The population of Black Africans is almost ten times that of whites and of colored peoples combined ("Census in Brief 2011" 23). Languages spoken by the majority are the ones that are less developed and denied practical space in education (Klapwijk and Van der Walt 67). Whites and the mixed population in South Africa, while the minority in number, are the majority who speak the languages of prestige and power as a first language.

Much empirical research has studied how well the policies and goals from LPHE have been implemented and what effects they have on learning outcomes, identities and attitudes. Generally, it has been found that while the sentiment for a multilingual higher education sector from the national policy is appreciated, implementation has seen mixed results and sometimes, has met with resistance. On one hand, there has been little success because the African languages had not been standardized or institutionalized before and few efforts have been in those areas after the policy declaration. There are few materials to work with. On the other hand, English is seen as a prerequisite for professional success, a skill essential to modernity and upward mobility (Ngcobo 700). Arguments against using African languages as LoI also come from the pressure of globalization. Students feel they are denied opportunities by not being educated in English.

There is a significant need for further research in areas like teaching and learning assessments, training of the support and administrative staff in universities, standardizing and expanding local languages and the possibility of further advanced studies in African languages.

Spain

Although Spain is also a multilingual country, the positions and powers of the individual languages involved and how they have been reflected through policy and education tell a very different story than South Africa. In the European context, most regions institute their minority languages at the kindergarten and primary school levels. (Cenoz 45). Although the Council of Europe has in statute encouraged use of minority languages in higher education, very few have extended to the university level, some exceptions being the Basque and Catalanian regions in Spain (Cenoz 42).

As high as 41% of Spain's population live in officially bilingual areas where the so-called minority languages are the language of instruction and government. Since the Constitution of 1978 was instituted, 6 out of 17 regions had the regional language and Spanish as co-official where Spanish is the only official national language (Lasagabaster 583). This paper will elaborate on the Basque Autonomous Country and the autonomous region of Catalonia.

Because of a history of linguistic and cultural repression in these regions, people truly hold the tie of language and identity close. They have continued to elevate the status of the minority languages to the point that the societies transitioned from diglossic, where there is a High variety and a Low variety divide in use, to bilingual, where it is not clear which language is more prestigious or powerful (Lasagabaster 584). Surely, these tensions are nowhere near being resolved with rise of linguistic nationalism and the force of globalization that brought English. This section will give a brief history, discuss the relevant policies and examples of implementation.

Catalonia

Catalán as a language emerged at the end of 10th century and had literary production emerging in the 14th century. Officially in 1713, Catalonia lost independence to the Castilian Kingdom and Catalán in turn became archaic (Miller & Miller 115). However, Catalonia as a

region continues to do very well economically. That fact became a driving force to revitalizing the Catalán language. However, Francisco Franco's dictatorship actively oppressed Catalonia and its language when he took power in 1939 (Miller & Miller 116). Shortly after Franco's death, the Constitution of 1978 was established. Catalonia and Basque gained the status of autonomy along with the freedom to choose the official language for their own region while Spanish remains the language of the country (Miller & Miller 116).

The status of Catalán basically followed the status of Catalonia. It has always been a point of contention because of the concurrence of Spain's political dominance and Catalonia's economic dominance (Miller & Miller 118). At the time of the Constitution of 1978, Catalonia readopted Catalan as LoI in school. Catalonia has become a deeply bilingual region as the Catalán people fought hard to normalize and institute the use of Catalan in the public domain. It has achieved high status officially and culturally in a relatively short span of time. (Miller & Miller 119).

The Catalan Government, in recent years, joined the Europeanization movement in Europe by instituting a foreign language that is "preferably English" (Sabaté-Dalmau 264). The government actively funds the universities that have trilingual plans ensuring the protection of Catalán and Spanish and introducing English. English is envisioned as a democratising lingua franca that increases employability and mobility but is also viewed as a "politicized threat to linguistic diversity" (Sabaté-Dalmau 263).

Most of the literature and research from recent years regarding Catalan higher education has mainly been concerned with adding English as the third LoI. The assumption seems to be that bilingual education of Catalán and Spanish is quite well-developed. However, Catalonia is currently undergoing major political changes as a result of decades of the independentist movement demanding sovereignty (Nougayrède). Language attitudes towards Spanish and status of migrants in Catalonia might change drastically because of this, but little research has been conducted regarding the recent developments.

Basque Autonomous Country

The Basque Autonomous Country had a similar relationship with the central government of Spain as Catalonia. Franco's dictatorship and imposition of Spanish everywhere

inspired social movements that were symbolized through language, so that speaking Basque is key to the Basque identity (Vega-Bayo & Mariel 14). In 1982, four years after the Constitution that granted Basque autonomy and freedom to educate children in either language, the Basque government published an educational law focusing on the normalization of the use of Basque (Vega-Bayo & Mariel 16). The Basque government successfully promoted the language in the past decades, and fluent speakers grew from 24.1% in 1991 to 30.1% in 2006. This is in part thanks to Basque being implemented as LoI (Cenoz 45). Significant corpus planning from the government has effectively standardized the language, expanded vocabulary to include specialized words and, in conjunction with academia, continues to create and translate educational materials in Basque. Substantial progress has been made on this front but it still pales in comparison to available resources in other languages like Spanish or English (Cenoz 48).

Secondary schools are divided into three categories based on LoI: Spanish only, Basque only, or a mixture of both (Vega-Bayo & Mariel 16). The percentage of either language of the mixed option differs in a wide range depending on the school. In fact, 58.8% of primary and secondary schools are taught in Basque, 22.3% are mixed and only 18.9% are taught in Spanish. In schools where language of instruction is one language, the other language as well as English would be included as subjects (Cenoz 45). Language attitudes also have a strong correlation with language of instruction. Spanish-instruction school children develop negative attitudes towards Basque whereas students in mixed or Basque instruction schools feel more favorably towards Basque (Lasagabaster 585). Parents have to make a decision that is considerably important given that the higher education sector also has these options (Vega-Bayo & Mariel 16). Students, for the most part, want to continue education in the same language of instruction from secondary schools (Cenoz 45).

The one public university in Basque is the biggest university in all of Spain with 57,000 enrolled students (“The University of the Basque Country: Basic facts & figures”). The university entrance exam can be taken in Basque or Spanish. The percentage taken in Basque has increased from 38% in 2000 to 57.5% in 2009. Compulsory classes are offered in both languages but specific fields have more restrictions. It has been found that Humanities and Social Sciences students tend to use more of the minority language (Cenoz 47). One might posit

that these fields are closer related to local people and culture. It would be significant for students to learn in languages that they mostly identify with.

At the same time, there is also an increasing number of courses taught in English. The attitude is generally supportive as the government sees English as a way to “foster mobility and participation in the European higher education” (Cenoz 49). One challenge regarding using Basque or English concerns the linguistic abilities of the academic staff. Fewer professors are qualified bilinguals. The university is very supportive in giving faculty and staff options to learn Basque during work hours, or create online programs that assist writing or allow time off to finish doctoral degrees. University faculty and staff are offered the same language learning service as government members and officials in Basque (Cenoz 51). The dedication of the government and institution in making multilingualism a reality at the university level is significant and has shown positive results.

Another main challenge concerns the effort of internationalization and the role of English. While the status of Basque has been elevated significantly in its own region, the Europeanization of higher education and the Bologna process has made English an important tool to access mobility (Kwiek 112). The University of Basque Country has made clear that their position is to reinforce Basque and internationalize at the same time. While transitioning into trilingual language of instruction at the university level may be plausible, the challenge remains in publishing research. Research published internationally is overwhelmingly in English. Advanced degrees in Basque would have to really prepare their students’ academic literacy in more than one language for their research to gain global relevance (Cenoz 51).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the context of South Africa, we see multilingualism being proposed in policy and sentiment but poorly executed with an immense amount of challenges. An immense amount of knowledge is being coded, produced, and perpetuated in English. This means that in order to conduct university life and research in the local African languages, a lot of governmental work in standardization, corpus planning and providing support systematically needs to be in place to develop these languages. In the context of Spain, the power and resources dedicated to the minority languages are multifold with governmental and social support. The higher education

system has matured enough to afford preserving a language strongly related to identity. The need to develop African languages as the language of instruction runs parallel to the need to develop African higher education in general.

Often times, a multilingual background is only recognized when the speaker also speaks the dominant tongue. However, for speakers of languages that are on the decline or rarely represented in public domains, the dedication to preserve a language or elevate a language lies not in its utility or power but in that the language carries lives, memories, histories, and cultures that are priceless.

A lot of research has focused on language attitudes of students towards the languages at play and continue to produce inconsistent results depending on context or even on the individuals studied. Attitudes of the speakers can to a degree decide the fate and development of the languages in question and even how successful their educational outcomes are. Statistics are not able to readily capture what the multilingual students' experience is.

In Lasagabaster's paper, he introduces the concept of linguistic cosmopolitanism, defined as "getting along across ethnolinguistic boundaries by accommodating the other groups' linguistic preferences or at least being open to doing so" (586). If we could recognize the coexistence of languages as a reality and not a threat, then communication can happen across language boundaries. Lasagabaster also encourages education to play a part in helping students explore their multilingual selves. The possibility of multiple selves is not readily understood by monolinguals but nor is it explicit for multilinguals who rarely reflect on their identities that are not necessarily in conflict. Language of instruction plays a part in affirming multiple selves as identity is also ever changing (Lasagabaster 593).

If languages can be understood as resources, sources of multiple selves and not simply as tools, perhaps we could cultivate a society that celebrates multilingualism. And languages like English can be learned with great motivation but not at the expense of home languages. If we understand higher education to be an institution that promotes knowledge and equality, transforms lives, lift people out of negative cycles, and asks questions that humanity is concerned with, then the discussion of language of instruction should never stop as we continue to understand language more deeply and fully and what it means to humanity and society.

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