

ABSTRACT

The new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) announced that “the official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu” (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, p. 4). However, only English and Afrikaans have continued to be used as languages of learning and teaching (LoLT) in higher education.

The Language Policy for Higher Education (DoE, 2002) in South Africa has also made a call to all institutions of higher learning to develop African languages. The Bill of Rights (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, p. 10) asserts “everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice...”. Up to now, there have not been practical plans to meet the aspirations of these language policies. Many African students face challenging linguistic contexts when they enter institutions of higher learning.

The purpose of this project was to create a comfortable “safe space” where a group of ten first year Sepedi home language students discussed Education Studies concepts. These students used their first language, Sepedi to discuss these concepts, although English was the language of learning and teaching at the University of the Witwatersrand. I aim to identify, describe, analyze and reflect on the kinds of learning practices that emerge in these small groups.

The research design was a qualitative case study. I collected data in two phases: a pilot study that I conducted in 2010 and a main study in 2011. Both phases took place on the premises of the School of Education of the University of the Witwatersrand. Interviews, observation of group discussions, students’ reflective reports and field notes were used for data collection. A thematic content analysis method was used to analyse the data.

The results indicate that when students are afforded a comfortable “safe space” to discuss academic concepts using their first language, key learning practices emerge that lead to learning and thinking about content. Students experienced freedom, enjoyment and camaraderie during the group discussions. Their participation skills in formal lectures and tutorials improved after the group discussions. They participated in bilingual and multilingual practices, such as code-alternation processes: code-switching, code-mixing, code-borrowing and code translation. They engaged in exploratory talk, using assertions, explanations, questions, challenges and so on to deepen understanding of concepts. I also observed that students used culturally oriented habits that motivated and encouraged them to learn. They also began to respect their mother tongue as a language that could be used in academic contexts.