**Review of Multilingual Universities in South Africa: Reflecting Society in Higher Education**

**By authors Liesel Hibbert and Christa van der Walt (eds.)**

**Blog/review written by Carol Christie, Department of Applied Language Studies, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa**

Hibbert and Van der Walt have dedicated their book, to be released in April 2014, to Neville Alexander who believed that languages other than those of the original colonisers should be given power and status in South Africa and Africa more broadly. The reality that most of us who teach in South Africa experience, however, is one in which the Constitution provides for the equal status of eleven official languages but business and teaching is done in English (or, to a limited extent, Afrikaans), the parents of our students choose, when they can afford to do so, to send their children to English-medium schools, and most of our students tell us that they prefer to study in English because ‘it is the universal language’, ‘it will give me access to the job market’, ‘I have always studied in English’ or ‘Xhosa is just too difficult’.

Much has been written about the potential detriment to students of not been given the opportunity to develop literacies in their home language before being expected to study in a second or third language. However: those of us who teach in contemporary South Africa also know that terms such as ‘mother tongue’. ‘first language’ and ‘home language’ no longer mean the same thing (if they ever did) and cannot be used to allocate students to uncomplicated categories. A young person in South Africa may very easily have had a Xhosa-speaking mother but consider English to be her home language because it was the main language spoken in the home and Afrikaans to be a first language because she studied it at ‘first language’ level at school. And we all have students who consider themselves to be ethnically Xhosa (or Afrikaans or Venda or Zulu or Pedi etcetera) while the primary language they use is English. We cannot return to apartheid-era ethnic and race categories which define us as having a particular ethnicity and therefore having to be taught a particular curriculum in a particular language.

The strength of the book is that it provides examples of how languages other than English can be used in university teaching in South Africa and can help students to learn even when the only language that all have in common is English. The book showcases current multilingual teaching and learning innovations in higher education in South Africa. Although language-in-education policies for multilingual contexts have been in place for some years, and have been discussed and critiqued, there is no overview which highlights the processes and success stories and the case studies conducted. This book fills this gap, by showcasing word done ‘on the ground’ by higher education practitioners and they develop ways of drawing on all available discourses and languages for strategic and systemically supported multilingual and biliteracy development in the formal tertiary education sector. The case studies presented by the next generation of up and coming mainstream academics, are extremely valuable in terms of the blueprints they offer and in terms of the range of exemplary practices modelled. A very wide international audience is envisioned for this book, as similar context currently occur everywhere , due to global migration. In terms of the African continent, the book clearly testifies, that the continent is inventing its own practices on an ongoing basis and that these are highly informative for language practitioners located anywhere.

The reality is that almost all of us are multilingual (or at least bilingual) and it is in this context that the editor’s use of the term ‘multilingual’ in the title must be considered. What is a multilingual university and are any universities in South Africa (as distinct from their teachers and students) truly multilingual? Hibbert is based at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, whose management acknowledge Xhosa and Afrikaans, in addition to English, as the predominant languages in the area while almost all business and teaching is done in English and students will only submit work in Xhosa or Afrikaans in courses to do with these languages and their literatures. Van der Walt is based at the University of Stellenbosch, long considered the intellectual home of Afrikanerdom, where the t*aaldebat* (language policy debate) continues and many staff, students and alumni continue to be anxious about it moving away from being an Afrikaans-medium university. Bilingual education, at least in Afrikaans and English has a long history in South Africa but the point is that it has only been done extensively in English and Afrikaans and not in the other South African languages. The status of Afrikaans was also an important aspect of Afrikaaner nationalism and it is arguably in this context that those in the *taaldebat* who bemoan a perceived move away from Afrikaans are campaigning for the rights of Afrikaans as a minority language. In contrast, however, most black South Africans, in spite of an often-asserted ethnic identity, do not appear to be asserting their right t be taught in ‘their own’ language. It is in this complicated context that Hibbert and Van der Walt present a number of case studies which describe and discuss attempts at and strategies for the use of multilingualism in university courses and classrooms in South Africa and this is a particular strengths of the book: it provides examples of strategies that we can all consider for use in our teaching.

Although, of course, being able to read and write in one or more languages does not necessarily make one critically literate. For instance, in the chapter titled “An exemplary astronomical lesson that could potentially show the benefits of multilingual content and language in higher education”, what is meant by an “astronomical lesson” (as opposed to an astronomy one) when it’s at home and surely if something “could” do something then it already has the potential to do so? This type of criticism from someone whose mother tongue, home language, first language and primary language of study have always been the same is, however, is perhaps exactly what the authors and editors of this book are addressing: we gain much more from the use of a variety of languages and literacies even if that use is nonstandard in semantics, syntax, register and idiom) than we stand to lose from the universal use of English.