

Preliminary core findings of a survey among students at Stellenbosch University on language policy and related matters

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Introductory remarks

As previously discussed in a progress report to Prof. Tom Park on 14 September, certain unavoidable circumstances have delayed the completion of this investigation. Although the majority of responses to the closed questions have already been tabulated, the open questions, together with their spontaneous responses, are still to be coded for computer analysis and incorporated into the results.

It is possible at this stage, however, to do a very short analysis of the results of a cross-section of 217 of the completed interviews. This follows below. **The results of the questions analysed here should not differ radically from the final result.** The summary that follows therefore gives early insights that, for purposes of decisions on language policy, may be valuable.

Core findings of 217 of the completed interviews

The interviews already analysed can be regarded as a thorough **cross-section** of student opinion:

Numbers in the preliminary analysis according to home language					
Afrikaans	English	Afrikaans and English	Xhosa	Other	PRELIMINARY TOTAL
n128	n47	n28	n4	n10	N217

The interviews indicate that the majority of students are generally satisfied with the current language policy within their faculties or that they find it acceptable:

Satisfaction with or acceptability of the current language policy:

- **Afrikaans:** 96%
- **English:** 81%
- **Xhosa:** -
- **Other:** 83%
- **TOTAL:** 91%

The investigation in its entirety and the responses to the open questions still being analysed, however, give the impression that the positions of the students are based not only on the formal policies within their faculties but are also related to various other factors and perceptions. The small group of Xhosa speakers held political considerations. Most of the student perceptions of the language policy are also relatively vague or confused. The students, as typically the case with most participants in surveys, show few signs at this stage of being aware of the subtle developments that can change the character of an institution over time.

Table 1 is based on a question posed only to those exposed to the T-option:

Table 1. Are the languages in the T-option being used equally or is more Afrikaans or more English being used?						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Equally – 50/50	21	13	29	–	–	19
More Afrikaans	39	60	39	50	67	44
More English	6	2	4	–	–	4
Sometimes one, sometimes the other	19	17	18	50	33	19
Other	2	2	4	–	–	2
Not exposed	13	6	7	–	–	11
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 1 indicates that the student experience is that the language usage pattern in the T-option classes is more skewed towards Afrikaans. Since the majority of students in these classes are Afrikaans speaking, this is understandable. It should be borne in mind, however, that the reaction to the T-option of a significant number of Afrikaans speakers is probably influenced by this language usage pattern. If, in the view of these Afrikaans speakers, their own language in these classes were not given preference, their satisfaction with the T-option might decrease.

Table 2 deals with the effect of the T-option on academic performance:

Table 2. Does the T-option affect academic performance positively, not at all or negatively?						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Positively	35	53	21	25	50	37
Not at all	43	32	46	50	–	40
Negatively	7	6	25	25	50	11
NA	15	9	7	–	–	12
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

It should be emphasised that the question that was posed in no way explored the pedagogic value of the T-option and that it simply tested overall reaction. Table 2 indicates that, except for the speakers of other languages, only a minority feel that their performance is negatively influenced by the use of two languages in class. It is remarkable that more than half the English speakers have, in fact, noticed a positive effect despite feeling that Afrikaans is given preference in class.

Table 3 reflects general reaction to the T-option:

Table 3. General experience of the T-option						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Valuable	16	21	25	–	67	19
Works well	40	43	43	50	17	40
Irritating	25	15	14	50	–	21
Very frustrating	5	11	7	–	17	7
Other	2	2	4	–	–	2
NA	13	9	7	–	–	11
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 3 indicates that a minority of the students exposed to the T-option find it irritating or frustrating. Apart from the handful of Xhosa speakers and the students speaking other languages, the English and partially English speakers appreciate the T-option most, again despite the fact that they feel that language usage is skewed towards Afrikaans. It is the Afrikaans speakers, however, who are most irritated with the repetition of lecture material – approximately one-third and therefore a significant percentage among the language majority at university.

What would be the reaction if the T-option were replaced with Afrikaans lectures only? Reaction is given in Table 4:

Table 4. Reaction if the T-option were replaced with Afrikaans only						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Would accept it	59	21	29	25	–	44
Would regret it	20	34	43	25	67	28
Would think of going to another university	4	30	14	25	33	12
Other	3	6	7	25	–	5
NA	13	9	7	–	–	11
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 4 indicates that reaction to this hypothetical possibility is not strong. More than half the English speakers would either accept or regret it but would not think of

leaving SU. What is surprising is that up to a quarter of Afrikaans speakers reacted negatively to the possibility. These students appreciate their exposure to two languages for various reasons, possibly partially because it is easier to keep up with writing down class notes.

Reaction to the other possibility – that of the replacement of the T-option with English lectures only – is equally interesting. This is indicated in Table 5:

Table 5. Reaction if the T-option were replaced with English only						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Would accept it	18	68	43	50	67	34
Would regret it	30	23	36	25	17	29
Would find it unacceptable	44	2	18	25	17	31
Other	1	2	–	–	–	1
No response	7	4	4	–	–	6
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 5 indicates that, again, reaction is not very strong, although only 18 per cent of Afrikaans speakers would accept such a change willingly. Remarkable is that a quarter and more of non-Afrikaans speakers would regret such a change. A significant group among them therefore seem to prefer the basis of Afrikaans academic culture.

This may be one reason for the results reflected in Table 6. **A significant majority in all language groups reacted positively to a balanced or equal T-option approach:**

Table 6. General reaction to equal language usage in the T-option						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Would be best	34	40	36	25	50	36
Would be acceptable	48	55	50	50	50	50
Would be less acceptable	13	4	11	25	–	10
Would be completely unacceptable	4	–	4	–	–	3
Other	2	–	–	–	–	1
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 7 reflects the same consensus. Over 70 per cent of all groups would like monitoring to ensure equal language usage in class (if such monitoring were at all practical):

Table 7. Need for the accurate and continuous monitoring of the T-option to ensure equal usage						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Very necessary	33	36	46	75	67	37
Relatively necessary	42	43	39	25	17	41
Relatively unnecessary	19	17	4	–	17	16
Completely unnecessary	6	4	4	–	–	5
No answer/ other	1	–	4	–	–	1
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

So far, the general inclination reflected by the responses is one of conciliation. Results for the next question, however, give another impression. This is reflected in Table 8:

Table 8. Satisfaction with the language policy IF Afrikaans were phased out as the medium of instruction at SU						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Very satisfactory	1	13	11	25	33	6
Relatively satisfactory	2	23	11	25	–	8
Doesn't matter	8	19	25	–	–	12
Relatively unsatisfactory	23	32	21	25	34	26
Very unsatisfactory	65	13	29	25	33	47
Other	1	–	4	–	–	1
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 8 indicates that the hypothetical possibility of Afrikaans being phased out would be perceived as threatening by not only nine out of ten Afrikaans speakers but also by more than 40 per cent of other language groups. There is therefore a significant view among non-Afrikaans speakers that the Afrikaans character of SU be retained.

Tables 9 and 10, however, show that both Afrikaans and English speakers do have a basic preference for or dedication to their own languages:

Table 9. Language that would be preferred as the medium of instruction						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Afrikaans	70	11	36	–	33	49
English	29	89	50	100	67	48
Xhosa	–	–	4	–	–	1
Other language	1	–	7	–	–	2
Other answer	–	–	–	–	–	–
No answer	–	–	4	–	–	1
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

A policy of a parallel medium of instruction is presented as an approach that could protect one's own language within a context of language conciliation. Reaction to this from students is given in Table 10:

Table 10. Reaction to a parallel medium of instruction at SU: two equal, separate streams						
	Afrikaans %	English %	Afrikaans and English %	Xhosa %	Other %	TOTAL %
Would be welcome	40	55	57	75	83	48
Would be acceptable	27	32	21	–	–	26
Doesn't matter	11	6	7	–	17	9
Unacceptable to a certain extent	16	4	11	25	–	12
Completely unacceptable	6	2	4	–	–	4
Other	–	–	–	–	–	–
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 10 clearly reflects that many students would readily accept the possibility of a parallel medium of instruction. Two-thirds or more would find this acceptable.

These preliminary findings have to suffice for the time being. The final report will reflect the content of the other structured questions and the spontaneous responses to the open questions, which should add significant additional insight.

A general impression from these preliminary findings is that Afrikaans-speaking students would be prepared to accept compromises in the language policy and that they experience certain benefits from their exposure to English that is presented by the T-option. This "obligingness" or conciliatory approach may well, however, be due largely to the fact that the general experience is that the language balance in the T-option is skewed towards Afrikaans. If stronger monitoring of the language balance were implemented – something all language groups among the students would support at this stage – at least part of the Afrikaans-speaking group would realise that the T-option would require certain sacrifices on their part.

Note should also, however, be taken of the fact that approximately one-third of Afrikaans speakers and nearly one-third of all students are experiencing irritation or frustration with the repetition of material in the T-option. Could such a significant proportion be reconciled with the requirements of a core policy?

Other matters still to be analysed will probably also indicate that students are still under the impression that Afrikaans at SU continues to enjoy a very dominant position. The view that Afrikaans is deeply entrenched probably gives Afrikaans speakers a feeling of language security, which leaves them free to follow a very conciliatory approach at this stage.

Other results indicate that the greater majority of Afrikaans speakers and approximately 45 per cent of English speakers would not want to forego the current Afrikaans character and language identity of the university. Any policy that in any way presents a threat to this character could therefore become a source of conflict over time. This is why the policy supported by all groups in the survey, namely that of parallel-medium instruction, would prove a much safer policy in the longer term. In other words, the preliminary survey findings, seen as a whole, give important indications that the current conciliatory approach among Afrikaans speakers would not necessarily form a stable basis for a language policy.
