# Learning foreign and indigenous languages: The case of South African universities

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## Abstract

Learning a language through another language is trivialto any type of language learning, whether it is the learning of a local or a foreign language. South Africa's language policy for higher education recommends the study of foreign languages (FLs) and indigenous languages.A decade after its adoption, the learning of a foreign or indigenous language in that foreign or that indigenous language, respectively, at universities has been overlooked. In essence, the learning of foreign languages at the country's universities dates back to the 19th century, when the first higher education institution,the South African College was established. At that College a Department of General Literature that offered Dutch, English, Latin and Ancient languages was established. English and Dutch teachers provided instruction in the English and Dutch language, respectively. The instructions involved theory, history and practice of English grammar and literature or Dutch grammar and literature. The learning of indigenous languages at the country's universities began in the 20th century under the departments of Bantu Studies. They were learnt through English, and then later through English andAfrikaans. The instructions involved theory, history and practice of English grammar and literature. The aim of this study is to gain knowledge on the different approaches that may be used to learn a foreign language and an indigenous language. The study focuses on the complex challenges facing the country's universities to adopt new, different and best models for the teaching of foreign and indigenous languages after many decades of using English and Afrikaans mediums. A case study method is used for this study. The emphasis is on the learning of foreign versus indigenous languages in South African universities (SAUs). The paper consists of an introduction, the theory of Grammar Translation Method (GTM), a case study on the learning of foreign versus South African indigenous languages (SAILs) at the SAUs, and a conclusion.

**Keywords:** foreign language, indigenous language, learning, English, Afrikaans

## Introduction

The Ministry of Education (2002) recommends "the development, in the medium to long-term, of South African languages as mediums of instruction in higher education, alongside English and Afrikaans"(p.15). Section 6(1) of the Constitution of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) confirms that "the official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu"(South Africa, 1996, p.14). The Ministry of Education (2002) also recommends "the study of foreign languages" (p.15).Section 6(2) of the Constitution of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) states, "recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages"( South Africa, 1996, p. 14). By our indigenous languages, section 6(2) refers to nine of the 11 officialSouth African languages - isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga; including the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and South African sign language. Therefore, in this study I examined whether the learning of indigenous languages is different from the learning of foreign languages in the SAUs. TheGrammarTranslation Method (GTM) emerged as one of the tools used by SAU senates to relegate the learning of South African indigenous languages (SAILs) to the level of foreign language (FL) learning. The next section is the theory of GTM. This will be followed by the Case study and the conclusion.

## The theory of the Grammar Translation method

Abdullah (2013) says the GTM is "one of the key methods applied for the teaching of foreign languages. It is a derivation of the classical (sometimes called traditional) method of teaching Greek and Latin" (p.124). Therefore, GTM was "based on the belief that different kinds of knowledge were located in separate sections of the brain" (Morales-Jones, 2011, p.64). Ducháčková (2006) says it is "considered to be one of the oldest methods and approaches in foreign language teaching" (p. 8). "Students learn grammatical rules and then apply those rules fortranslating sentences between the target language and their native language. Advanced students may be required totranslate whole texts word-for-word" (Abdullah, 2013, p.124). Therefore, Brown concludes that the focus on GTM is "on grammatical rules, memorisation of vocabulary and of various declensions and conjugations, translation of texts, doing written exercises" (Chang, 2011, p.15).Morales-Jones (2011) says "the main goal for learning was notfor speaking and/or communication. The driving force was to exercise the mind and at the same time to be able to read in that language" (p.64). Therefore, GTM was mainly designed to teach Latin and Ancient Greek, also known as 'dead' languages, "based on the fact that people no longer speak Latin and Ancient Greek for the purpose of interactive communication"(The Grammar Translation Method, 2010, p. 1). In addition, Morales-Jones (2011) says another reason for studying those foreign languages, such as Latin or Greek was to appreciate the classics in their original language, and education was the privilege of an elite class, thus it was amarkof an educated person to be able to read the classics.

Abdullah (2013) confirms that GTM "by definition has a very limited scope. Because speaking or any kind of spontaneous creative output was missing from the curriculum, students would often fail at speaking or even letter writing in the target language"(p.125). It is surprising that GTMis "still used for the study of languages that are very much alive and require competence not only in terms of reading, writing and structure, but also speaking, listening and interactive communication" (The Grammar Translation Method, 2010, p.1).

Therefore, sources such as Morales-Jones (2011) and The Grammar Translation Method (2010) provide important points to be noted about GTM, such as its emphasis on teaching grammar and

employing translation to ascertain comprehension; classes are taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language; GTM does not produce speakers of the languages studied; much use of the native language is employed because the goal was not oral proficiency; teachers did not necessarily have to be fluent speakers of the target language because the focus was not on communication; it dominated public-school and university language teaching in the United States until World War II; much vocabulary is taught in the form of lists of isolated words; grammar provides the rules for putting words together, and instruction often focuses on the form and inflection of words; long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar are given; often the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue; and little or no attention is given to pronunciation.

## The Case study: learning of foreign versus indigenous languages in the SAUs

This case study comprises of five subsections: the problem, steps taken to review the problem, results, challenges and lesson learned.

### The problem

The SAUs are failing to distinguish between the learning of the country's indigenous languages and the learning of foreign languages. There is less research on what are the elements or 'factors' of the failure, and how they relate to one another. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the problem. I will attempt to do so in relation to language and race.Ashcroft (2001) says "to understand the link between language and race, we must go back long before the emergence of race as a category of physiological discrimination, to the uses of language in 'othering' the subjects of Europe's colonial expansion" (p.311). Section 9(3) of the South African Constitution, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996)explains that the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on race and language; and section 29(2) of this Constitution provides everyone the right to "receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable" (South Africa, 1996, p. 14).A year later, the White Paper 3 disclosed the existence in the country's higher education of an inequitable distribution of access and opportunity for students and staff along lines of race, and proposed that all institutions of higher education develop mechanisms to create a secure and safe campus environment that discourages harassment or any other hostile behaviour directed towards persons or groups on any grounds whatsoever, but particularly on grounds that include race and language(Ministry of Education, 1997a). Section 27 (2) of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997states that "the council, with the concurrence of the senate, must determine the language policy of a public higher education institution" (Ministry of Education, 1997b, p.24). The White Paper 3 also identifies a three-fold mandate of higher education: Human resource development; high-level skills training; and production, acquisition and application of new knowledge (Ministry of Education, 1997a). The Ministry of Education (2001) cites important fields of study that could play an important role in contributing to the development of the African Renaissance that continues to be marginalised in SAUs. In this case it identifies, in particular, fields of study such as African–South African indigenous–languages and culture and African literature (not only in its English form). There are also promises to encourage the development of programmes in marginalised fields of study such as African (South African indigenous) languages as well as the more general restructuring of their curriculums to reflect an orientation towards Africa, in particular, South Africa. In addition, the Ministry of Education reveals the extension of the problem by the historically white Afrikaans-medium institutions that "are gradually moving towards the adoption of a combination of dual and parallel-medium language strategies, language continues to act as a barrier to access at some of these institutions"(Ministry of Education, 2001, p.37). Therefore, the language policy for higher education was published in 2002 with its promising recommendations for indigenous languages and foreign languages. This was followed by the Ministerial Committee (2005) report that singlesout conditions significantly conducive to the successful use of South Africa's neglected indigenous languages, not only as mediums of instruction but also for their more enhanced use in the public domain, including the extent of literacy in the South African indigenous languages, official recognition of South African languages and use of South African languages in education.

Although the status of indigenous languages is raisedby the Constitution (supported by the Ministry of Education with White papers, National plans, Acts, policies and reports), fields of study such as South African indigenous languages are still marginalised in higher education. .

### Steps undertaken to review the problem

Providing comprehensive advice on the importance of SAUs rethinking new approaches to improve the teaching of South African indigenous languages is an important part of the promotion and development ofSouth African indigenous languages. Three steps are outlinedto help the SAUs raise the status of SAIL learning.

### *Sensitising SAUs councils and their senates to the relationship of        power and GTM*

This is the first step undertaken. Activities include a review of the use of power and GTM on SAIL learning in the history of South African higher education system. The emphasis is on supplying information on the impact of power and GTM on SAIL teaching to the SAU councilsand their senatesto build evidenced-based arguments that will convince them. Power plays a role on the relegation of SAIL learning to the level of FL learning in SAUs.

### *Observation and analysis of the present state*

Thisis the second step undertaken. Activities involvetheobservation and analysis of the present state of the South African indigenous-language teaching at SAUs. The emphasis is on supplying data on the teaching of South African indigenous languages versus foreign languages to SAU councils and their senates to build evidence-based arguments that will convince them.Power is still controlling the SAUs on the teaching of South African indigenous languages as if the target language were a foreign language.

### *Integration*

This is the last step undertaken. Activities involve the integrating of the results from the first three steps. It involves supplying information on the link of the colonial, apartheid and present teaching of South African indigenous languages versus foreign languages to SAUcouncils and their senates.

### Results

### *Results on power*

Power relegates the teaching and learning of SAILs to the level of teaching FLs through GTM. Power is one of the more contestable concepts in political theory, but it is conventional and convenient.Nye defined it as "the ability to effect the outcomes you want and, if necessary, to change the behavior of others to make this happen" (Gray, 2011, p.v).In power relations, "man has, through the ages, come to recognize the importance of being able to coerce the weak into following the strong" (Meyer, 2007, p.8).Nye (2006) identifies three basic ways to accomplish this – you can coerce them with threats, induce them with payments or attract and co-opt them.There are two types of power: hard power and soft power.Hard power is defined by Nye as the power that uses military or economic coercion to get others to change their position; he definessoft power as the national resources that allow a country to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes (Trunkos, 2013). Thus, Nye (1990) confirms thatAfrica experienced hard power because the nineteenth-century great powers in Africa "carved out and ruled colonial empires with a handful of troops" (p. 162). TheAfrican Union (2006, p.3) confirms that the nineteenth-century great powers "led to the depersonalisation of part of the African peoples, falsified their history, systematically disparaged and combated African values, and tried to replace progressively and officially, their languages by that of the colonisers".The British were part of the nineteenth-century great powers. Nkuna (2010a) says the policy of the British colonies was "initially known as 'guardianship'. It was renamed 'partnership leading to independence within Commonwealth. It gave

power to the English educated African elites" (Nkuna, 2010a, p.49).Louw and Kendal (1986) confirm that the British colonised South Africa in 1806. They say, "in 1813, the Governor, Cradock, announced that all future appointments would depend on the knowledge of English. From 1814 onwards, and especially after the arrival of the English settlers in 1820, English-speaking officials were appointed in increasing numbers and favoured in many ways. In 1822, English became the sole official language of the Cape" (Louw and Kendal, 1986, p.23).In the context of this study, Christie (1991) discloses that British authorities used education as "a way of spreading their language and traditions in the colony – and also as a means of social control" (p.34). "English became the primary language or language of tuition for the South African College (the first higher education institution) which was opened in 1829. Colonisation influenced the choice of languages for the College programmes" (Nkuna, 2010b, p.30). McKerron (1934) says that the College had a Department of General Literature (DGL) in which Dutch literature andEnglish, Latin and Ancient languages were taught.The teaching of indigenous languages was excluded at the College. A classical method was used to teach Latin and Ancient languages at the DGL. Therefore, GTM was used to teach Latin and Ancient languages, and English and Dutch were the mediums of instruction in the Latin- and Ancient-language classes.

It took about 92 years from 1829 to introduce the study of SAILs in SAUs. Maseko (2011) assumes that "teaching, learning and research in these languages started in the early 1900s" (p.9). For instance, according to Mandela (1994),Professor DDT Jabavu, the member of staff first appointed when Fort Hare University opened in 1916, "was awarded a degree in English from the University of London… taught Xhosa, as well as Latin, history and anthropology"(p.52). Therefore, Maseko (2011) also reveals that the teaching of SAILs have "been through other languages, even when taught to mother-tongue speakers" (p.9). Thus, GTM was used for teaching and learning SAILs. All these are rejuvenated by Lalu (2011),who observes that The Milner Commission of Inquiry (1903 to 1905) is the first to "call for scientific studies of natives of South Africa … The connection of knowledge with the exercise of power may be gleaned in the formation in 1921 of the school of African life and languages at the University of Cape Town" (p. 8). The languages referred to in the quotation were the SAILs.

### *Results on observation and analysis of the present state*

There are 23 SAUs observed. Not all 23 SAUs have FL fields of study (seeFigure1).
**Figure 1.** Percentage of SAUs with and without FL Fields of Study
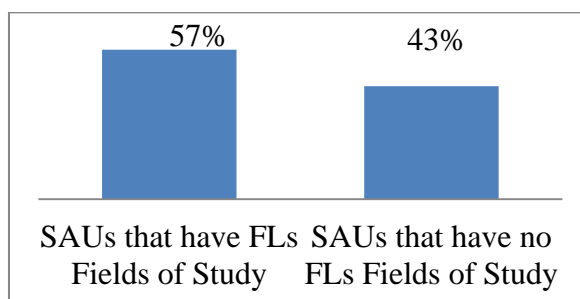


From Figure 1, 13 (57%) of the 23 SAUs choose their offerings from languages representing hard power (Arabic, Dutch, French, Italian, Portuguese, German and Spanish); Latin and Ancient languages (Greek and Hebrew); and an emerging soft power in the global arena (Mandarin).The courses are taughtat the beginner levelusing English as themedium of instruction and GTM.SAUs that do not have FL Fields of Study are predominantly universities of technology (see Figure 2)."Universities of technology focus on skills and professions" (Nkuna, 2010b, p.159). It means the learning of FLs is not

necessary for skills and professions, but it is necessary for theory and scientific research. However, the GTM was adopted for teaching and learningSAILs in all three types of SAUs.

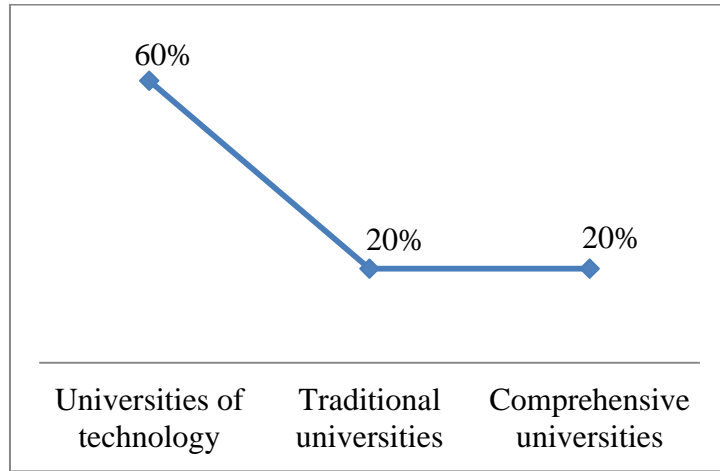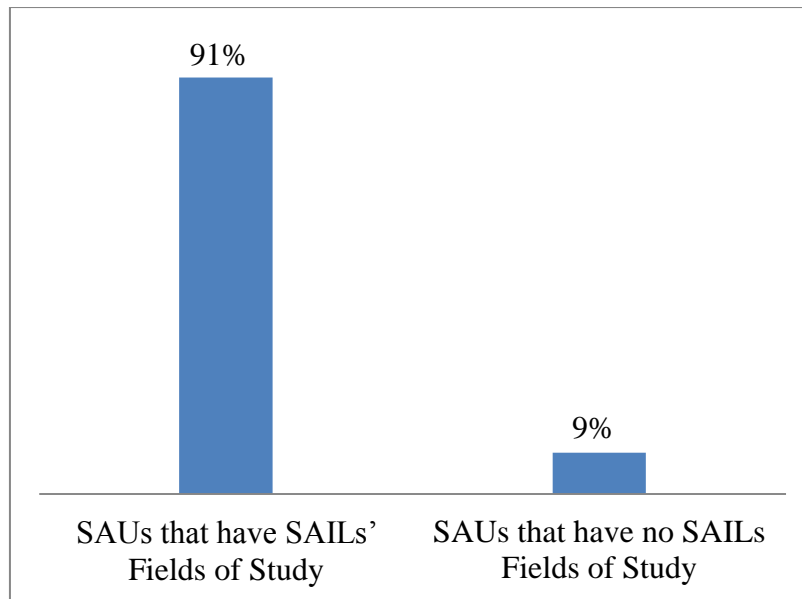**Figure 2.** Percentage ofSAUs that do not have FL Fields of Study



Figure 3. outlines the percentage of SAUs with and without SAIL fields of study.

**Figure 3.** Percentage of SAUs with and without SAIL Fields of Study



Only two (9%) of the SAUs do not offer SAILs. These are universities of technology that are expected to produce skills and professions. However, the 21 (91%) of the 23 SAUs that have SAIL Fields of Study include universities of technology, traditional universities and comprehensive universities. Figure 4 outlines the percentage of SAUswithSAILfields of study.

**Figure 4.** Percentage of SAUs that have SAIL Fields of Study
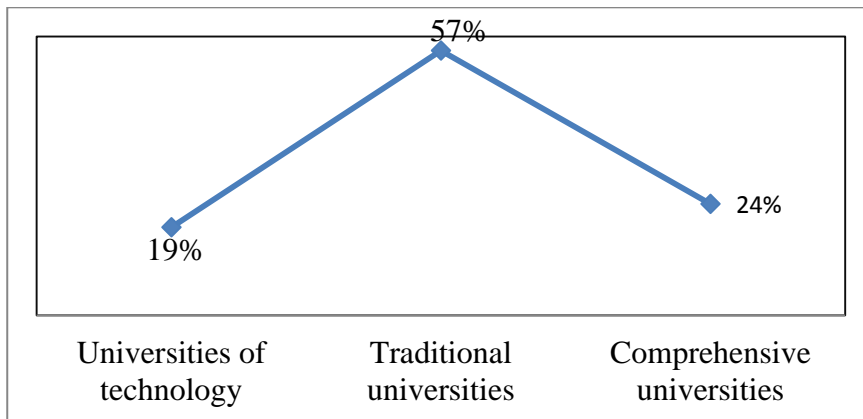


From Figure 4, only the four(19%) of the 21 SAUs provide learning to students with skills for professions. The remaining 17 (89%)provide theory and scientific research. The comprehensive SAUs are dominated by traditional ones, even in their own space, and focus on theory and scientific research. Most SAUs are now beginning to offer parallel courses for SAILs (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Percentage of SAUs with or without SAIL parallel courses and others
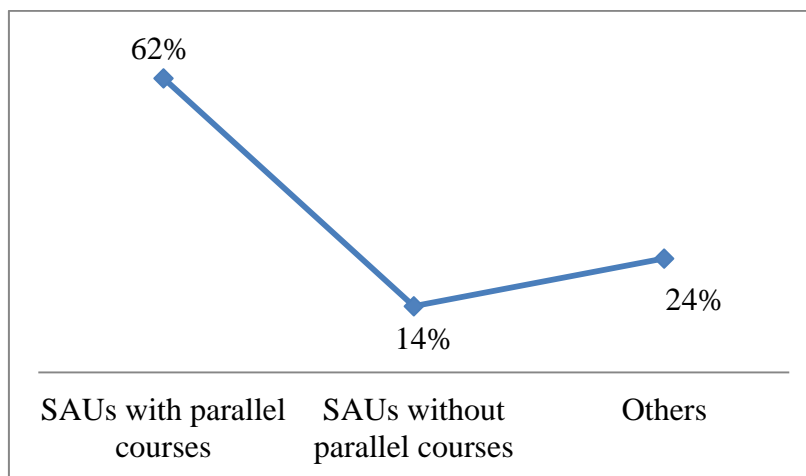


From Figure 5, 13 (65%) of the 21 SAUs provide SAIL learning as non-mother tongue and mother-tongue courses.The non-mother tongue modules are mainly referred to as beginner's courses. The medium of instruction remains English.

### *Results on integration*

I assessed the results on 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 to help thecouncils and their senates from the 23 SAUs to understand the competition between FL learning and SAIL learning in the country's universities. The assessment indicates that FL and SAIL learning have equal status at SAUs. They are all learned as L2 or below L2 status. The hegemony of English is increasing and the Mandarin language of China is already offered at three of the 23 SAUs.The Mandarin offerings arebacked by theChinese Confucius Institute for Language and Arts, already established at three SAUs.

## Challenges

Power is the major challenge facing the SAUs on SAIL teaching. The hard power of the colonial powers wassustained through English hegemony. The emergence of globalisation andthe information age add to the sustainability of colonial power and create soft power.SAILs continue to diminish to the level of Latin and the Ancient languages. In addition, there is no progress on the learning of SAILs and students from SAIL classes do not know how to communicate using SAILs. Furthermore, the SAUs prefer to offer an FL rather than offering SAILs.For instance, you may find an SAU offering all 12 FLs and only one SAIL. In addition, FLs can have their own Departments,withpriority mostly given to theEnglish language, but SAILs are grouped together to form African Languages Departments.

## Beyond the results

An integrated approach to SAIL learning in SAUs should be established.This should be done in consideration of their official status. All stakeholders should support such a project.

## Lesson learned

The intervention showed that there is still a long way to go for SAIL learning at SAUs. Important factors on the development and promotion of SAILs in SAUs are still overlooked. Inclusion of SAILs for the sake of satisfying the call for their inclusion without commitment by the councils and their senates in the country's universities is common.

## Conclusion

FL learning at SAUs surpasses the learning of SAILs. Hard power created in 19th century still prevails and soft power is emerging. The hard power seems to have created African elites whoprefer English rather than indigenous languages.

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