



The Role of a Language Services Department in Facilitating Learning in a Multilingual Student Environment: the Case of the University of South Africa (Unisa)

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Abstract

Unisa, as an ODL institution in a country with eleven official languages and a student corpus representing this multilingual reality needs to support teaching and learning by facilitating the language challenges students face. These challenges are linked to the fact that the majority of students study through their second or third language, while instruction is through the medium of English and, to a lesser extent, Afrikaans. This paper concentrates on the role of the language services department in ensuring that study material is presented in accessible language, supported by translations and/or glossary lists in the main languages, and that the material used is relevant to the environment in which students find themselves. The language department serves as a filter between the lecturers and the students and takes on the role of surrogate student. This paper explores the use of machine language to expedite translation requests, the structure and functions, interaction with lecturers and outside language bodies.

1. Background

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is an open distance learning (ODL) university with a history of 142 years. It has the largest student enrolment of universities in South Africa, with main campuses in the City of Tshwane and Florida in Gauteng province. It draws students from within and outside South Africa's borders. The enrolment for 2009 to 2013 is represented below:

Nationality	2009		2010		2011		2012		2013	
South Africa	242 512	92,0%	269 061	91,7%	300 842	91,5%	307 142	91,3%	324 607	91,4%
Other SADC countries	15 682	6,0%	18 647	6,4%	21 831	6,6%	23 480	7,0%	24 863	7,0%
Other African countries	3 815	1,4%	4 067	1,4%	4 252	1,3%	3 978	1,2%	4 074	1,1%
Rest of the world	1 505	0,6%	1 606	0,5%	1 751	0,5%	1 601	0,5%	1 497	0,4%
No information	45	0,0%	56	0,0%	188	0,1%	85	0,0%	199	0,1%

Fig 1. Enrolments at Unisa (The 2009 to 2013 student figures presented are based on data extracted from the final audited HEMIS submissions to the Department of Higher Education and Training – DHET.)

Unisa has transformed significantly since 1994 and is now one of the world's mega-universities. Unisa was the first institution in South Africa to put into effect the rationalisation policy (advocated by the Department of Education) by merging with Technikon South Africa and incorporating Vista University's distance education campus in 2004. As a result of this merger, Unisa became a comprehensive institution and the leading ODL university in South Africa, which bridged the gap between university and technical education by offering learning opportunities at all levels and broadening the scope of skills transfer and career development.

2. Language usage

Unisa staff and students comprise speakers of different languages (not only all 11 official languages, but also languages spoken in Africa and the rest of the world). Communication and documentation for administrative purposes are carried out through the medium of English only and the main medium of instruction is English. Before 1994 when South Africa had only two official languages (Afrikaans and English) all study material was also available in Afrikaans. As English gained more ground as the preferred language in the academic world the demand for Afrikaans dwindled.



3. Study material delivery

Study material is presented in written form, and made available electronically and in print. The written text is complemented by various visual aids, such as graphics and video. An e-tutor system and video-conferencing are also in place to facilitate learning at a distance. The quality of presentation depends on a seamless blend of all the components. In this paper I concentrate on the written form and how a language services department can help to produce study material that will enable students from different language backgrounds to gain the knowledge needed to qualify for the world of work.

I base my presentation on my experience as both a language practitioner and a manager in the Directorate Language Services at Unisa. This directorate has formed part of a bigger department, Study Material, Production and Delivery (SMPD), reporting to the Vice-principal Operations, since its inception almost 50 years ago. It will soon be moving to the Vice-principal Academic: Teaching and Learning mainly to be closer to the academics, and the course and instructional designers.

4. Team approach

Unisa follows “a team approach in curriculum and learning development and consults and collaborates with relevant stakeholders when developing and offering programmes”. [1]. As part of these teams the 30 permanent language practitioners and large component of freelancers work in close collaboration with the academics and its sister departments such as the Directorate for Curriculum and Learning Development (DCLD) and Print Production.

5. Intervention by a language services department

All study material generated by the academic staff (the lecturers) goes through a text editing process before being printed and/or uploaded on the online platform. This is necessary because “Unlike in face-to-face interactions, there is no opportunity to explain, highlight, redefine or defuse ...”. [2]

Just as any publishing house uses language practitioners to ensure that the titles they publish are error free and well presented, so too Unisa acknowledges this important function and has instituted a section specifically devoted to this task. In the case of Unisa as an ODL institution, the availability of clear text to support prescribed books dealing with complex study material is especially important.

The language practitioner is the first reader of the study material once it has been developed, written by the academics and assessed by critical readers. He or she provides a bridge between the subject specialist and the student and therefore needs to ensure that language usage and academic content presentation are accessible to students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

At Unisa, not only is the student component multilingual, but also the lecturing cohort. English is not the first language of many lecturers and although they might have studied through the medium of English their own competence in the language can vary from excellent to mediocre. The role of a language services department is thus indispensable; not only to iron out grammatical errors but also to intervene in such a way that the language helps students to understand complex and difficult study material. Study material is generated by academics who are the subject specialists, and it is a language practitioner’s task to ensure that a bad text does not hamper the learning process. As Plotnik [3] puts it: “Authors know their subject. Editors specialize in knowing the audience.” In the case of Unisa study material students make up the audience and language practitioners, as surrogate students, can easily put themselves in students’ shoes.

6. Text quality

It is essential that language editors have a thorough knowledge of English, a good general knowledge and the necessary editing skills to help lecturers to transfer their subject knowledge to their students. Besides having to have the required formal qualifications language practitioners must pass a stringent language test and interview before being appointed. This is followed by various ongoing training interventions, both internal and external. Internal training is done by the managers and through peer reviewing. External trainers such as John Linnegar (editandtrain.com) and Dr Eleanor Cornelius (University of Johannesburg) have made major training inputs. Language practitioners draw from various sources to evaluate a text and decide on measures to improve the quality, such as Renkema’s [4] CCC model (correspondence, consistency and correctness) and other linguistic features such as sentence length, ambiguity, passive voice, inappropriate register and problematic syntax. The works of Van der Poel et al [2], Cutts [5] and Butcher [6] have become standard references in our section.

7. The role of the language practitioner as text editor

The text editor’s responsibilities are numerous and varied. Using MSWord’s track changes and comment balloons the main tasks include:



- Correcting grammatical, spelling and syntax errors, unidiomatic usage and inconsistencies in the use of subject terminology
- Adhering to agreed style guidelines or to compile a style sheet to ensure consistent use of terminology and style throughout the text and related texts
- Ensuring that the content and structure of the text are coherent and the text unfolds logically
- Cross-checking the correctness of facts and subject terminology
- Checking that examples and case studies are relevant and clarifying
- Ensuring accuracy, readability and consistency
- Checking that graphics and other visuals are functional and well placed
- Applying the appropriate register and style of writing suitable to the year level (applying principles of plain language wherever possible)
- Making sure that meaning is clear and free of ambiguities
- Checking for plagiarism or unacknowledged paraphrasing of sources, libel, bias and discrimination
- Correcting inconsistencies in the table of contents, headings, numbering, in-text references and reference lists.

8. Providing for the needs of a multilingual environment

The importance of a good English text to facilitate learning cannot be stressed enough, but in a multilingual environment translations can be used to support learning. A good translation starts with a good source text. Translations of texts do not replace the English versions but serve to enhance and facilitate the learning experience by providing additional resources for students who have difficulty in fully understanding the English text.

As a national university, Unisa does not only serve students in a specific region as is the case with residential universities. Unisa has an obligation to cater for speakers of all official languages. Its language policy is in line with the South African government's attempts to ensure that all eleven official languages enjoy equal status and are used more widely. This is reflected in the Use of Official Languages Act, 12 of 2012. This is, however, not an easy task with the greatest difficulty being the need for further development and standardisation of the African languages. This situation is receiving attention with the help of bodies such as the South African Translators' Institute (SATI) and the Pan African Language Board (PANSALB) and the language departments or directorates at universities, especially those of Unisa, Northwest University and Stellenbosch University.

At Unisa the use of all official languages is being expanded by a special project of the Senate Language Committee (in cooperation with Language Services). The committee identified 28 modules where poor student results were observed, the so-called "modules at risk". Based on the assumption that language could be the barrier all 28 modules are now being translated into all official languages to help students who battle to grasp difficult content in English. The outcome of this project is keenly awaited.

9. The role of the language practitioner as translator

A multilingual student corpus can greatly benefit from translations to ensure a better understanding of the subject matter. For this translators and reviewers are needed. Wordfast Classic (WFC) is our main CAT tool, but the free local programme, Autshumato is gaining popularity. These tools help to expedite the translation requests emanating from the lecturers. Despite these aids the translations of full study guides remain an enormous task. Many departments have therefore adopted the method of supplying students with comprehensive glossary lists in English, Afrikaans, IsiZulu (understood by speakers of IsiXhosa, SiSwati and IsiNdebele) and Northern Sotho (understood by speakers of Southern Sotho and Setswana). In cases where another language would be more suitable based on the student profile, such requests are carried out. These glossaries are included in the study package and uploaded on the electronic platform.

The translator's tasks involve

- Translating the edited English text into the target language ensuring that it is grammatically, syntactically and idiomatically correct and keeping the target student group in mind
- Ensuring that meaning is retained and not changed
- Researching and applying subject-specific terminology using dictionaries, textbooks, online resources, existing study material and terminology lists, and by consulting specialists
- Avoiding misunderstanding by adding English terms from the prescribed material in brackets
- Compiling terminology lists and translation memories or updating existing lists for future use.



In an effort to deliver the best work possible translations undergo a quality control process performed by internal and external reviewers.

Translators are also encouraged to translate existing Wikipedia articles to augment non-English speakers' resources.

10. Conclusion

A language services department can help any enterprise, not only an institute of higher learning, to deliver quality communication to clients. Language practitioners provide an indispensable link between the authors of documents and the target audience by insuring that the intended meaning is conveyed and received in the best way possible, and that this is supported by translations in a multilingual environment. This need has now also been cemented in the Use of Official Languages Act, 12 of 2012 and its call to establish language units in national departments, national public entities and national public enterprises.

References

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