

Learning a language with a colleague: A case study of South African Police Services (SAPS) members in the Western Cape

A B S T R A C T This article is a case study of the language learning progress of members of the South African Police Services (SAPS) who were taught Xhosa and Afrikaans by the Iilwimi Centre for Multilingualism and the Language Professions at the University of the Western Cape. In particular, it evaluates the effect of the collaborative language learning partnerships that were established while the courses were in progress. These partnerships were set up between officers from the same police station, some learning Xhosa, and others learning Afrikaans. These partners continued to practise with each other after completing the formal course. The researchers also observed the level of multilingualism practised at each participating police station.

Keywords: multilingualism, collaborative language learning, role of learner.

1. Background

During March and November 2003 the Iilwimi Centre for Multilingualism and the Language Professions at UWC presented language acquisition courses in Xhosa and Afrikaans to selected members of the South African Police Services. Pairs of candidates from the different police stations, who were Afrikaans and Xhosa speaking respectively, were selected. The intention was that they would be able to return to their stations and continue the learning process with the help of their partners, while at the same time setting an example to their other colleagues. They were also expected to drive the implementation of a policy of multilingualism at their stations. Candidates were selected from areas where the need for service to a multilingual community was most acute, or where the specific candidates experienced a need for additional communicative skills.

The courses were structured around a number of scenarios representing common occurrences in the daily routine of SAPS staff members (see 'Course Content' below). Visser and Venter (2005: 36) contend that *effective second-language teaching of the African languages for specific purposes to adult learners "...is dependent on the design of theoretically informed courses and materials that reflect the kind of design features which would facilitate optimal language acquisition in terms of Valdman's (1989: 21) pedagogical norms generally accepted for successful communicative language teaching"*. In the same article, Visser and Venter (p. 37) list Valdman's four principles of pedagogical norms:

- "(i) They should reflect the actual speech of target language speakers in authentic communicative situations
- (ii) They should conform to native speakers' idealised view of their speech use
- (iii) They should conform to the expectations of both native speakers and foreign learners concerning the type of behaviour appropriate for foreign learners
- (iv) They should take into account processing and learning factors."

To a large degree, our courses conformed to Valdman's pedagogical norms. From the start the learners were guided to focus on their real communicative needs. They learned different learning techniques, which can be applied to the learning of different types of input. During the sessions the learners were exposed to new language input, which was then assimilated through various kinds of learning activities, particularly role-play and one-on-one interaction between the learners, the presenter and the two assistants. After the third session of the day the learners could practise their newly acquired communicative skills on their colleagues. The notion here was that a learner would continue practising with a colleague from the same police station who spoke a different mother tongue – a type of collaborative language learning (Richards & Rogers, 1986), where practice in Xhosa was exchanged for practice in Afrikaans.

Included in our courses was language input needed to enable the learner to greet members of the public and colleagues appropriately, to become acquainted and to exchange pleasantries with them. They also learned how to obtain personal details from members of the community, as well as the basic language required when dealing with topics such as assault, robbery, house-breaking, theft, car theft, hijacking, murder and rape. Learners were exposed to the necessary language structures and vocabulary, and also learned about the culture of the people who use Xhosa and Afrikaans to communicate with others.

I. COURSE CONTENT: XHOSA

INTRODUCTION: All language acquisition courses run by the Iilwimi Centre begin with a detailed **needs analysis** session, so that learners can make their contribution to the aspects covered by their course.

SESSION ONE: PRONUNCIATION AND GREETINGS

- Vowels
- Clicks
- Consonants
- Singular greetings
- Plural greetings
- Forms of address
- Vocabulary

SESSION TWO

Getting acquainted.

SESSION THREE

Instructions and time.

SESSION FOUR

Work-related vocabulary, oral practice.

SESSION 5-10. The last six sessions taught the language of situations typical to those the police might encounter, and included dialogues on the following:

- How to arrest a suspect and read him his rights
 - Interviews with suspects and eye-witnesses
 - Getting a statement from someone
 - How to treat victims of crime
 - House to house searches
 - Treatment of people of different ages and from different backgrounds
 - Learning more about Xhosa culture
 - Oral presentations
 - Evaluation
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II. COURSE CONTENT: AFRIKAANS

SESSION ONE: Needs analysis

SESSIONS TWO TO FIVE: A short communicative course in basic Afrikaans, with lots of attention being given to correct pronunciation and intonation.

SESSIONS SIX TO ELEVEN:

- Contained the same types of situational dialogues as for the Xhosa course, as well as elements of Afrikaans culture
 - Becoming more proficient in 'Cape Afrikaans'
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Our follow-up research, on which this article is based, investigated the following questions:

1. How effective our methods were in allowing the learners to acquire sufficient Xhosa or Afrikaans for their professional needs;
2. Whether the learning partnerships established between learners from the same police stations had enabled them to continue learning from each other and how effective such learning had continued to be;
3. What impact the language courses had on the effectiveness of the learners within the South African police services, i.e. whether they were able to provide a better service to the public and to be more effective at solving crimes; and
4. Whether the courses had any direct effect on their language attitudes towards Afrikaans and Xhosa.

The researchers travelled to the various police stations from which the learners came in order to interview them and to observe their interactions with the public and with speakers of the target language. Interviews were also conducted with all the language facilitators involved in the courses in order to do a critical analysis of their teaching methodologies.

2. Literature Review

Collaborative language learning is an approach that maximizes the use of learning in small groups, and depends on social exchanges of information between learners (Richard & Rogers, 1986: 192). "Group work relies heavily on input from learners, both as individuals and as members of a group, and on their recognition of co-team members as a potential resource" (Balladon, 2004: 108). This type of interaction can also benefit learners of different languages. For example, if I am an Afrikaans mother-tongue speaker who learnt Xhosa and my colleague is a Xhosa mother-tongue speaker who learnt Afrikaans, we can help each other by practising these languages together and correcting each other. Although there are websites dedicated to people looking for language practice partners, we have not found evidence of any research carried out on language exchange in the *same profession*, which is the focus of our research.

Collaborative (also known as cooperative) learning can take place between two or more learners working together. What is important is that they cooperate and help one another to solve a problem or work through a task. It also encourages learners to become actively involved, as they often feel that it is safer to contribute in pairs or small groups, rather than alone in front of the whole class. Lastly, learning cooperatively can increase a learner's self-confidence, and is often more fun than being isolated as a single learner (Kruger & Pringle, 1998:8).

Collaborative learning also implies that one has to take account of the *learner's* role in language learning. Ellis (1985:10) states that variability in language learners' rates of success results not only from contextual factors, but also from individual differences in the way learners learn a second language (L2) and the way they use their L2 knowledge. It is probably accurate to say that no two learners learn a L2 in exactly the same way. The factors that can influence the course of development are potentially infinite and very difficult to classify in a reliable manner. Learners need to practise in order to be able to communicate successfully. In the practical teaching situation this means that continuous explanation of rules and activities that do not venture above sentence level will not help language acquisition and learning.

There are a number of factors that learners bring to bear on the learning and acquisition of additional languages. Kilfoil and Van der Walt (1989: 6-8) list these factors as follows:

- Motivation for learning the language. Different types of motivation, i.e. integrative or instrumental motivation (Gardner, 1985), will result in the language being learnt and acquired differently.
- Personality. Certain characteristics seem to make it easier for some learners and more difficult for others to learn and acquire another language. A self-conscious, anxious or shy learner could find interaction and communication in another language threatening. Outgoing and relaxed personality types, on the other hand, are happy to engage in group and class activities.
- Intellectual ability. Many teachers regard high intelligence as a prerequisite for successful language learning. However, the interaction of a variety of factors usually determines success or failure in the learning process.
- Learning styles. Students do not learn in the same way. The two aspects of personality and intellectual ability could, together, be seen as evidence of specific learning styles.
- Age. Young children seem to learn another language more easily than adults although motivation could, of course, again play a crucial role.
- External factors influencing the learner, e.g. personal stress or prejudices against speakers of the target language.

- Distance between languages. The concept of distance implies that some languages and cultures are 'closer' to one another than to others and, if the learner can transfer some of the knowledge from the first language to the target language, the learner task should be easier (Kilfoil & Van der Walt, 1989: 8).

There is broad agreement among researchers about the factors that appear to contribute to effective language learning – plenty of exposure to the target language (Ellis 1994: 26), plenty of practice with comprehensible input (Ellis, 1994: 602), a learning environment that is conducive to effective language learning (Kruger & Pringle, 1998: 8), conscious rule application (Krashen, 1982:19), and the right to make errors (Ellis, 1994: 46).

Theorists also agree that no single language teaching methodology is effective with all learners, but that teachers need to draw on a range of methodologies depending on who their learners are, and what the circumstances are in which they are teaching: "Learning and teaching are complex activities requiring multiple, flexible approaches, and the nature of the teacher and the needs of the learner are as varied as the approaches available" (Balladon, 2004:108).

Our facilitators were largely influenced by two language teaching methodologies – the Cognitive and the Communicative. According to Weideman (1986:46), the Cognitive (also known as the Grammar-Translation) language teaching method deals more with learning the grammar and vocabulary of a language. A learner is required to memorise various lists of vocabulary and different information rules for grammar and to apply those rules in subsequent exercises. In contrast, the Communicative method, rather than describing the core structures of language through traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary, encourages the language learner to express him-/herself, however erroneously, in the target language from day 1. Instead of emphasizing reading and writing, this method stresses the importance of conversation or oral practice (Wilkins, cited in Richard & Rogers, 1986: 64).

As our police learners were learning Xhosa and Afrikaans for the first time¹ in their lives, they learned by picking up a few words from examples or conversations practised in class and by using them in other situations. In the classroom, for example, we practised sentences that deal with verbs and nouns, using examples like the following:

Khwelani ngaphakathi evenini (Get inside the van).

Saphani lo mimpu (Give me those guns).

Hou die man vir my dop (Watch this man for me).

Ons moet daardie man agter tralies kry (We must get that man behind bars).

The practice with these simple examples helped our learners to transfer these verb forms to sample dialogues and roleplays based on the actual situations in which they used Xhosa or Afrikaans as members of the SAPS. Here is one example of such a roleplay.

Xhosa: An armed robbery

Amapolisa : Izandla phezulu ! (Hands up!)

¹ A number of the officers learning Afrikaans had learned the language at primary school. The course helped to reactivate their passive knowledge of the language.

Abaphangi : *Uxolo tata upolisa. (Sorry, Police).*

Amapolisa : *Iphi le mipu yenu benidubula ngayo?*
(Where are the guns which you were using?)

Umphangi wokuqala (1st robber) : *Khange ndisebenzise mpu mna. (I didn't use a gun).*

Umphangi wesibini (2nd robber) : *Andinawo umpu mna. (I don't have a gun).*

Umphangi wesithathu nowesine (3rd and 4th robbers) : *Asinayo imipu thina. (We don't have guns).*

Amapolisa : *Ndiyanibamba ngoku. (I'm arresting you).*
Khwelani ngaphakathi evenini ! (Get inside the van).

Abaphangi : *Sikhwela siyaphi? (Where are we going?)*

Amapolisa : *Niya esikhululweni samapolisa. (You are going to the police station).*

Facilitators also used songs, rhymes and tongue-twisters in order to help the learners to acquire the pronunciation and intonation of the target languages. Here is one of the rhymes created for the Afrikaans class by facilitator Annemarie Swartz:

Ons is die manne, ons is die manne van die SAPD
Fier stap ons deur die lewe tree vir tree.

Om Afrikaans te leer
is wat ons begeer.

Ons doel daarmee
om beter diens te gee.

So dien ons jou en jou en jou en jou
So dien ons elke man en vrou.

(We are the men, we are the men of the SAPS
Proudly we walk through life step by step.

To learn Afrikaans
Is what we desire.

Our aim with that
Is to give better service.

So we serve you and you and you and you
So we serve every man and woman).

By and large, a blend of the Communicative and Cognitive methods turned out to be the most effective ways of teaching our police learners. And as stated earlier, our methods and materials also largely reflected Valdman's pedagogical norms (1989). We had arrived at our methodology through experimentation with various methods in teaching Xhosa and Afrikaans to large groups of educators across the Western Cape, and had learned what methods tended to have the greatest impact with busy professional people (Dyers, 2003).

3. Methodology

Firstly, permission to conduct the research as well as to gain the necessary ethical clearance was sought from the Ministry of Safety and Security, the area commissioners of the Eastern

and Southern Metropole (Cape Town), the commanders of the individual stations, as well as the different officers we had taught. All information given was on a voluntary basis, and strict anonymity was maintained. The results of the research were also sent to the Ministry of Safety and Security.

A total of 35 respondents from five targeted police stations participated in the research project. In addition, the interaction of the police respondents with the public and with speakers of the target language was observed. This enabled us to assess how much language they had managed to retain, and also to establish whether the practising partnerships helped in their continued language development. The interviews and observations also provided some insight into their attitudes towards the target languages as well as to the speakers of those languages.

The qualitative research data therefore consisted of interviews with course participants and fieldwork observation. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated, while notes were kept on the fieldwork observation.

We chose to use interviews because we wanted to get detailed responses to and wider discussion on, our research questions. A specific questionnaire was developed to conduct the interview, consisting of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are simple and understandable and they give an interviewee sufficient freedom to answer, thereby supplying the interviewer with more information. The data was analysed by reading and comparing the responses to the interviews as well as the notes on the observations. The data was ordered and analysed according to an inductive process leading to the establishment of certain categories of responses emerging from the data. As particular patterns of responses emerged, they were categorised according to this process of induction.

4. Results

4.1 Results of the Fieldwork Observations at five police stations

With two possible exceptions, we were encouraged by the level of multilingualism practised by the SAPS during our fieldwork observations at the police stations. Our observation was limited to the area of the charge office, where members of the public came to report crime or to seek assistance with documentation.

Station 1 (located in a mainly Afrikaans-speaking area)

Most of the staff at this station spoke Afrikaans as their mother tongue, but there were also a few Xhosa speakers. We observed that Xhosa clients were addressed in English. However, many Xhosa members of the public using this station spoke Afrikaans with reasonable fluency, which made things easier for the police officers.

Station 2 (located in a mainly Xhosa-speaking area)

Here, all three languages were being used by the police officers and counter staff, both as languages of internal communication and for external communication with members of the public, who were served by those who could speak their languages.

Station 3 (located in a multilingual area – Afrikaans, Xhosa and English)

In this police station, people could expect to be served in their mother tongues. Many of the Xhosa mother tongue police officers and counter staff were fluent in Afrikaans, while those who

spoke the other languages made an effort to greet people in Xhosa before assisting them in English. People could also insist on being helped in their mother tongues.

Station 4 (located in a mainly Xhosa-speaking area)

Here, people were also served in their mother tongues. Most of the Afrikaans or English-speaking officers would greet Xhosa clients in Xhosa then switch to English to find out what their problems were. If the client spoke no English, mother tongue speakers were available.

Station 5 (located in a mainly Afrikaans-speaking area)

This was the only police station that appeared to use mainly Afrikaans, although officers assured us that they were willing to serve members of the public in English as well. During our period of observation, many Xhosa clients came in to have various documents certified, but we observed that they could cope quite well by communicating in Afrikaans with the police officers. We felt that this was because of the influence of the area in which they were living. A few people were also accompanied by Afrikaans-speaking friends or children, who served as informal interpreters.

4.2 Results of the interviews conducted with the police learners

These results were obtained mainly through face-to-face interviews, with eight respondents answering the questionnaire in writing due to time constraints. The respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the courses and the presenters, and all expressed the need for further classes. They also reported that members of the target language community reacted very favourably to their attempts to communicate in the language. In addition, they felt very proud of their achievement in learning a new language and being able to communicate more effectively with colleagues who spoke a different mother tongue. They had an improved self-image and an enhanced sense of their important role in a multilingual society. What follows here is an analysis of responses to those questions that elicited more varied answers, with a specific focus on the question related to continued language learning in partnership with a colleague. We will first consider the responses to the other questions.

What motivated you to learn Xhosa or Afrikaans?

The majority of the respondents appeared to have an instrumental motivation for learning these languages – they needed the language in their work, to deal more effectively with their colleagues and to serve the broader community. For example: "*As a manager, it is important for me to acquire a third language. I deal with a big group of diverse staff members and the community.*" A small number of the respondents indicated integrative motivation for learning the target language, citing friendships or a desire for closer ties with the target language community.

How good is your Xhosa or Afrikaans now?

Some respondents agreed that their proficiency in the target language was still at a very basic level. Those who learned Xhosa still struggled with the pronunciation or described their language ability as 'poor' or 'moderate'. But many of those who learned Afrikaans seemed to be faring much better, perhaps as a result of working in the environment of the Western Cape, where a significant majority of the population speak Afrikaans as their mother tongue. Another factor may be that the stations where we carried out our research had a majority of Afrikaans-speaking senior officers, and this may have increased the pressure on speakers of Xhosa to improve their Afrikaans. And, as was pointed out earlier, several, if not all, of the Xhosa officers had learned

Afrikaans at school, unlike their Afrikaans or English-speaking colleagues who were learning Xhosa for the first time. Another factor that cannot be ignored is the grammatical complexity of Xhosa when compared to the relatively simple grammatical system of Afrikaans.

Do you use your Xhosa/Afrikaans only at work?

Different responses were received, but it appeared that many tried to use the third language outside work as well: "... *at the garage, in shops and other places, people like to communicate in Xhosa*". Some learners of Xhosa reported practising at home with their school-going children, who were also learning Xhosa at school, but others said that none of their neighbours were Xhosa-speaking, and that English was used when socializing with Xhosa friends. One learner of Afrikaans said that he only used Afrikaans at work, because "...*our Coloured neighbours speak English most of the time, and it's not easy to ask them to speak Afrikaans*".

How has learning Xhosa and Afrikaans influenced the relationships between staff and the public at your police station?

This question also elicited mainly positive responses, e.g. "*At our station, the fact that we learned Xhosa and Afrikaans, built a good relationship with the public, because now we can communicate with each other fluently*". The public response had been very positive, and had bred respect for the efforts of the police in learning the community's two main languages. The officers themselves felt more equipped to deal with the public, and staff relationships had improved. Most felt that these advantages could only be maintained with further language courses. However, some stations still mainly relied on English when communicating with the public.

Did you and your Xhosa/Afrikaans colleague who attended either the Xhosa or Afrikaans course at Ilwimi Centre continue to practise with each other? Why? Why not? How did it work? Did you continue to learn a lot from each other?

This question formed the key issue in our research, as we wanted to determine the effectiveness of continued language learning with a partner. Here, changed working situations influenced the responses and continued progress. A number of officers had been transferred to other stations, and could no longer practise with the partner from the course. However, where colleagues still worked at the same police station, some partnerships were continuing most effectively, while others had either broken down or been less effective. Here are some of the negative responses:

Yes, but I am mostly learning more about the Xhosa culture to make it more understandable.

No, sometimes we just greet or thank each other, but we don't practise regularly. Nevertheless, I am continuing to learn more Afrikaans.

No, my Xhosa colleague is a shift worker and I rarely see her at work, as I work office hours.

No, because we are not in the same office. But I practise Afrikaans with the colleagues in my office.

The learners of Afrikaans quoted here appeared to be more willing to continue practising the language than the learners of Xhosa, who had either given up, or were concentrating on learning

about Xhosa culture instead. Differing language attitudes may have influenced these choices, and it may also be possible that these officers found English sufficient for their communicative needs in a multilingual setting. However, the positive responses were more encouraging for our research:

Yes, the situation is that in my presence they speak Xhosa, and I learn from them. I also teach them Afrikaans.

Yes, in order to improve our Afrikaans, it helps a lot, as we find it easier to communicate with our own colleagues.

Yes, because when I want to know some words in Xhosa, I ask him. He does the same with me when he wants to know some Afrikaans words.

Yes, I also continue to learn a lot from my colleague (Afrikaans speaker who learned Xhosa).

Yes, we appreciate each other very much and even our families are socializing now (Afrikaans speaker who learned Xhosa).

The above responses clearly show that regular practice with an established partner in the same working environment can enhance language learning beyond participation in a formal course. The last response quoted above shows that at least one partnership had been extended beyond the working relationship to the intimate sphere of socialising as friends, which could provide a wider environment in which to learn about a partner's language and culture.

We also probed respondents about exactly what additional language learning had taken place. In the first few weeks after completion of the formal course, they reported that much of the practice with partners concentrated on work we had covered, particularly greetings, enquiring about someone's personal circumstances, and instructions. After that, specific chunks of language were mastered through regularly being exposed to the partner's repeated use of an expression, or through asking the partner for the correct expression in Xhosa or Afrikaans. Many of the respondents also reported feeling much more at ease in dealing with members of the public who spoke the target language, because they could recognize certain words and expressions and no longer felt at a complete loss when dealing with speakers of the language. As one partnership reported:

Partner A: It helped me a lot as some of my colleagues are Afrikaans speaking. Now I can speak with them and understand them.

Partner B: Yes, I now understand most Xhosa words when people are talking to me.

One senior superintendent even reported that three policemen who had learned Xhosa had been able to rescue a suspected criminal from an angry crowd of Xhosa speakers, by being able to pick out some of the words of a member of the public who came to warn them about the situation.

5. Conclusions

Feedback from the learners immediately after completion of the formal language learning courses revealed a high degree of satisfaction with the course contents and teaching styles of the facilitators. In addition, the learners also expressed great satisfaction with the opportunity

to interact with their partners during the afternoons and everyone expressed the need for continued language learning courses. It was clear from the outset that the presenters were able to facilitate the learning process in a way that was beneficial to the learners and enhanced their capacity for learning the new language.

The research conducted here provides more evidence of the value of collaborative or cooperative learning in bi-directional partnerships with mother-tongue speakers of the target language/s. But such learning should preferably be entered into only when one has gone through a formal language-learning course and has gained some basic understanding of the structure, vocabulary and pronunciation of the target language. In addition, frequency of exposure and working in the same profession are major contributing factors to the success of our learners, as well as the amount of personal investment (cf. Peirce, 1995) by each partner.

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