

Ngifunda isiZulu Kamnandi: effective study techniques for learning a foreign language in a distance education environment

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a real life experience of the author in having to cope with learning a foreign language, namely isiZulu. It is specifically about the act of memorising foreign language vocabulary. Two memory techniques, visualisation and association, are applied to the learning and memorisation process of foreign language vocabulary. The article further reflects in general on the learning experience the author had with the Certificate Course in Communication Skills in Zulu, offered by Unisa's Department of African Languages. The aim of this article is to create an awareness among Unisa lecturers of the pitfalls and possibilities encountered by learners in a distance learning environment.

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE

The purpose of this article is to highlight some effective study techniques in learning a foreign language, in this case isiZulu. This is based on a real life learning experience in a distance education environment. Some background information on this experience will be supplied in the next paragraph. The rest of the article will focus on the experience of foreign language teaching (Mandarin and Russian) at Unisa and the problems encountered with learning a foreign language by distance education. Next, effective learning techniques will be highlighted, together with suggestions for helping to memorise foreign vocabulary by making use of these study techniques. These techniques will then be applied to the learning of Zulu vocabulary. Finally, the article will highlight a number of general suggestions on how the isiZulu language course can be improved to ensure maximum learning success.

As mentioned earlier, this article is based on a real life experience by the author, of the Certificate Course in Communication Skills in Zulu, presented by Unisa's Centre for Pan African Languages and Culture Development. My aim for enrolling for this course was twofold: firstly, in the light of the national and local (Unisa) transformational process, I felt an urgent need to familiarise myself with an African language, together with knowledge of the ways and customs of fellow black South Africans (colleagues). I assumed that if I studied an African language, both the language and the world view would be communicated throughout the course. Secondly, the first words of an African language that I learnt, way back in my primary school days, were Zulu words. I cherished them and with the years I "got a feel" for the language. I could "hear" it when it was spoken near me, and naturally became an enthusiastic participant in the SABC Zulu educational programme Siyafunda, which was televised during the mid-1980s.

Although I wanted to know more about the Zulu language and improve on the little I already knew, I could never muster enough courage to register for a full year course at Unisa where I knew I would have to struggle through learning a new language as a distance learner.

At that point I was delighted to hear about African Languages' Centre for Pan African Languages and Cultural Development and an invitation to Unisa staff members to register for a 12-week language course (one and a half hours per week, face to face). Classes were offered during office hours (10:00 to 11:30) on Tuesdays (the class which I attended) as well as from 18:00 to 19:30 of that same day. Four lecturers from Unisa's African Languages department conducted the classes. The fact that two of these presenters were mother tongue speakers is significant. Classes were conducted in a very relaxed atmosphere with learners interacting with lecturers in the form of questions, feed back on exercises, basic conversations in isiZulu, etc. The number of learners that attended the morning session never

exceeded three. This is understandable in the light of the fact that we were the first group to enroll for this course (July to October 2001).

TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE BY DISTANCE EDUCATION

Unique problems of language learning by distance

A brief investigation into the teaching of foreign languages at Unisa yielded enlightening results. Hau-Yoon (1994:74) asked herself the question: "How should I teach my students?" (students enrolled for Mandarin 1.) She finally resorted to the theory of H Douglas Brown for second language acquisition, and consequently structured the Mandarin 1 course in such a manner that students progressed from understanding to learning, from learning to practice (or drill), from there to recognition and then back to understanding.

"Understanding" in this context would mean telling students beforehand what was going to be discussed and what they should know at the end of a particular section of the course. "Learning" is to make sure that nothing in the teaching was left to the imagination of the learner. Basic tools had to be provided for everything the learner was expected to learn. "Practice" (or drill) is particularly concerned with pronunciation and, broadly speaking, "an attempt to help certain things become second nature" (Hau-Yoon 1994:75). Because the Chinese written characters are introduced right from the start of the course, "recognition" of these characters became an important aspect of the learning process.

Garmashova (1998:97) supports an even broader didactic vision when teaching a foreign language when she states: "The result of educational activity in terms of teaching foreign languages (including Russian as a foreign language) in the first place is supposed to be an ability to communicate in a foreign language." For her that means that language proficiency lies in speaking, understanding during listening, reading and writing. Although the levels of proficiency differ considerably from the Special Course to the third year in Russian, the basic notion is understanding the structure of the language in order to communicate effectively. In essence, this corresponds with the basic approach in Unisa's course in Zulu communication skills (CZUU01-A).

Learning isiZulu in a distance education environment

This is the place to thank and congratulate the compilers of the short certificate course in communication skills in Zulu and to remark in general on aspects of this course that relate to the basic purpose of this article.

Two very important didactic principles for learning a foreign language were communicated to learners once we were enrolled in the Zulu course:

- Principle 1: "learn a little, use it a lot", together with
- Principle 2: always follow this sequence: "-qonda" (understand), "-funda" (learn), "-sebenzisa" (use it, work on it).

This simple didactic philosophy (and I must say, practice) became the recipe for successful learning for each of the learners in our group. These principles of learning a new language ultimately worked towards the aim of the course, namely "to enable you to greet people, ask them about themselves, make requests, describe situations, ask for assistance, talk about yourself and, in short, hold a basic conversation" (CZUU01-A:1).

It was only after I had scrutinised my 1985 TV Workbook 1 of Siyafunda for clues on its didactic approach that I discovered how different it was from that of CZUU01-A. A brief comparison will suffice. With Siyafunda the "emphasis is on speaking Zulu ... Correct pronunciation is important if you wish to be clearly understood ... Where writing and reading practice is suggested, you should also ensure that you are able to say the Zulu. Games are an easy and relaxing way of helping you to learn a language ... but remember, for the games

to be of value, you must say the Zulu while playing" (all their emphases) (Siyafunda:2). What Siyafunda therefore suggested was that the learner learn short phrases (therefore vocabulary) by heart and then use them in a conversation and in this way learn to "speak" Zulu. The Siyafunda Workbook was, consequently, filled with Zulu vocabulary and expressions. Learners were, however, never advised on how to master all these new words. Nowhere did the compilers of the Siyafunda course supply learners with the semantic "rules" of the Zulu language constructions. It seems, therefore, that the "-qonda" (understanding) part was totally missing in the Siyafunda approach.

My question as a learner was: How does the Zulu language work? and How should I learn this new language? It is of utmost importance in learning a new language that the total structure of the language, together with techniques on how to master it, be conveyed to learners.

CZUU01-A, on the other hand, teaches one the "rules" of the language which enables the learner to eventually create his or her own short sentences. To my mind, it is much more empowering to be able to create my own conversation with a Zulu-speaking person than to repeat sentences I have memorised of which I do not even know which is the verb and which is the noun!

No language can be used without vocabulary. It is the purpose of the next few paragraphs to suggest a technique for learning new vocabulary.

EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES FOR LEARNING FOREIGN VOCABULARY

Techniques to enhance effective learning

The publication by Van Schoor, Mill and Potgieter, *Effective study* (2001), is an attempt by Unisa's Bureau for Student Counselling and Career Development to "[provide] beginner learners, veterans, teachers and members of the general public with practical and effective techniques to improve their study and work performance" (Van Schoor et al 2001:1). It subsequently discusses in detail a study process called the EFT Study Process (EFT: Exploration, Fixation and Testing). It is in the Fixation Phase (Van Schoor et al 2001:90-112) that one encounters memory techniques for thinking and learning successfully. Memory strategies to be utilised during this phase of learning include classification, acronyms, association, imagery, key word method and the link system. This article is especially concerned with the role of association and imagery in memorising vocabulary of a foreign language.

Currently all students of Unisa are advised (through inclusion of an order form in the 101 Tutorial Letter) to buy the Unisa publication *Effective Study*. The ultimate aim of this publication is to enhance the "efficiency and effectiveness of the study process" (Van Schoor et al 2001:2). This reflective article is not a review of this book, but an attempt to look into the possible support it can offer Unisa students studying a foreign language, in my case, isiZulu.

Appropriate techniques for learning vocabulary and new jargon

Vocabulary is an important aspect of any language. Therefore, learning (and thus, remembering) new sounds and their meaning is part and parcel of mastering a new language. Van Schoor et al (2001:95) indicate that memory techniques (mnemonics) can assist one in remembering "basic facts, terminology, main points and key words". Van Schoor et al (2001:104) do indeed include an explanation of the value and use of association and visualisation in learning vocabulary of a foreign language. I am convinced that mnemonic strategies (especially association and imagery) can go a long way in assisting learners to master new words and their meanings, and I wanted to try these techniques when learning Zulu vocabulary. It is the aim of this paragraph to elaborate on the examples by Van Schoor et al and to apply these principles to learning Zulu vocabulary. I am, however, of the opinion, that their examples could have included more interaction between the objects, more vividness

and bizarreness (cf Van Schoor et al 2001:102), as well as colour, humour and other enhancers of imagery and association.

"Association occurs", according to Van Schoor et al (2001:101), "at a conscious level, so as you read, you may simultaneously be 'seeing' something in your mind's eye or hearing something in your mind's 'ear'." New information is constantly linked to information already in one's brain. Consequently, conscious associations while you learn allow one to retrieve information with greater ease. Using association in learning vocabulary becomes a rather simple exercise because there are two items involved, namely the foreign word on the one hand, and its equivalent meaning on the other. These two elements are then linked through association.

Association is closely linked to imagery or visualisation, which "involves consciously creating visual images in your mind of the information you want to remember" (Van Schoor et al 2001:101). To improve one's visual images it is important to "see" the picture as vividly as possible, adding colour, movement, feelings or emotions, size and shape (bigger or smaller than life), even humour and bizarreness (cf Van Schoor et al 2001:102).

These principles (visualisation and association) form part of a discipline called Accelerated Learning, with its underlying principle of improvement of one's capacity to create images which can improve one's ability to learn more rapidly and more effectively (cf Mulligan 1988:54).

APPLICATION OF THESE LEARNING TECHNIQUES TO LEARNING ZULU VOCABULARY

How would this work in practice?

Let us take a number of Zulu words and learn them together with their meaning by means of association and visualisation.

Zulu Verbs:

-hlangana, meaning "to meet"

I can "see" someone named An(n)a (the last three letters of the Zulu verb sound like a girl's name) who meets (the meaning of the verb) a slang (Afrikaans for snake and derived from the sound of the first five letters of the verb, -hlang). To add vividness to my image I "see" An(n)a as a little African girl somewhere in a rural village and she is very afraid (emotion added to the image) of this big black snake.

-thengisa, meaning "to sell"

In this example, I can visualise a country's currency (money) called Gisa (bizarreness added to the image). Then I "see" someone sitting at the side of the road "selling" (the meaning of the verb and my link between the foreign word and its meaning) goods (colourful and vivid: yellow and orange pawpaws) for ten (10) Gisa (derived from the sound of the verb, -thengisa) each.

-bheka, meaning "to watch"

I visualise my kids wanting to "watch" their favourite TV show, but I want to "watch" my favourite rugby team playing their final match of the season. So what do they do to convince me to switch over to their channel, to "watch" their show? They "beg" me (the k has a soft g sound in Zulu; which sounds

like bheka to me). I emphasise "to me", because this is a very personal and individualised process. I work with images and associations that I have in my personal frame of reference, which will be different from that of all other learners.

-bhala, meaning "to write"

I see in my mind's eye a baal (Afrikaans for bale; derived from the sound of the Zulu verb) of hay. I see myself taking a straw from the bale, dipping it into a bottle of ink and "writing" my name with it. The individualistic character of this process of visualisation and association allows one to use whatever language, experience and knowledge one has to fulfil the task.

Zulu Nouns:

umdokwe, meaning "porridge"

This is a difficult one and I am unable to derive a familiar sound or part of a familiar word from it. To solve the problem I simply visualise myself preparing my favourite porridge (putu) in front of the stove on a Saturday morning. While I "see" myself doing it, I repeatedly tell myself that what I am preparing there is umdokwe. I can even smell the rich aroma of the porridge as it cooks (including senses into my image). Repetition is a very important aspect in memorisation. All these images need to be revised and repeated regularly until the new sound and its meaning is automatically linked in one's mind.

umfula, meaning "river"

I "see" a raging "river" of bright brown water and an umfana (boy; a Zulu word I already know) trying to cross the river. As he enters the water, I suddenly think to myself : What a "fool" (from the sound within the word) he is to do it! The river is much too "full" (another similar sound to the one in the noun, -ful-).

inkinga, meaning "problem"

I visualise myself spilling ink on my wife's best tablecloth, the one we bought in Mexico (remember this is just a created image, in this case one I got from looking at the photos of a friend who had recently been to Mexico). I "see" the tablecloth as an original Inca (a concept triggered in my existing frame of reference by the sound -inga) creation - embroidered with colourful motifs and all. This spilling of the ink on the Inca tablecloth, of course, causes a huge "problem" between me and my wife. It seems that "seeing" the images in the present tense further enhances memory.

ingoma, meaning "song"

From my existing knowledge I know that a sangoma (which has the same sound as the last syllable of ingoma, the word I have to learn) is a type of diviner in the African tradition. I have also seen these people on television as they chant and sing while busy with their rituals. I therefore "see" myself "in" (first syllable of my new word) a hut together with one of these sangomas. She is constantly humming and singing a "song" (the Zulu word is a noun, not a verb and I have to remember that too) while performing some kind of ritual.

To further illustrate how personal these images and connections (associations) are, I want to share with you the strategy of a Hong Kong lady (with whom I shared my learning experience) in remembering the Zulu noun inkinga (problem). According to her, Chinese folklore teaches that a decorated war hero should never sit next to the "king" to act as his adviser. The successful general should rather retire from public service because he knows that the king will soon enough regard him as a rival, which will eventually lead to him being eliminated.

With this in mind, what image and connection can be made to remember the Zulu word *inkinga*, meaning "problem"? The image is that of a Chinese war hero who (politely) turns down the invitation of the king to take a seat in the royal council chamber, because the veteran knows that being in with the king would eventually lead to a problem. Do you see how this image and association builds up to *inkinga* = problem?

This once more illustrates that one's existing frame of reference (that which you already have in your mind) plays a crucial role in determining how easy (or not so easy) it will be to remember by simply making use of visuals and connections. Personal experience has taught me that many of our students at Unisa do not have a very extensive frame of reference (due mostly to a lack of visual impressions during childhood, including books, in their immediate environment, like at home or in school classrooms). One can advise these students to extend their frame of reference by deliberately starting to notice things around them (everyday objects like the shapes of buses, types and names of cars, the different colours of grass, the texture of roofs, the sounds of different birds); to reflect on ways that objects interact (eg feet and shoes, rain falling on a roof, legs pedalling a bicycle), to read everything they see (like advertisements, news headlines, brand names, vehicle number plates, titles of books). In short: teach them to become aware of everything and everybody around them. This will surely contribute to the development of a less restricted frame of reference.

See for yourself, it works ...

Go through the above-mentioned Zulu words and their images and associations one more time. See if you can remember their meanings by recalling the image and the association:

- thengisa, meaning (to) ...
- inkinga, meaning ...
- hlangana, meaning (to) ...
- bhala, meaning (to) ...
- umfula, meaning ...
- umdokwe, meaning ...
- bheka, meaning (to) ...
- ingoma, meaning ...

To a learner who has never encountered this type of memorisation (learning), it might well sound like a very long and complicated method. This is indeed the hardest part of the learning process, because it takes time and a lot of effort. I can, however, state from personal experience that once the image and the association is made, and has been repeated regularly, it sticks in the memory and one has no problem in retrieving or recognising the word and its meaning again. Van Schoor et al (2001:104) stress the fact that by repeating one's images, memory is strengthened and that with practice these images and connections can be formed within fractions of a second. Indeed, "... it takes courage to step out of the comfort zone and stretch your mental boundaries" (Van Schoor et al 2001:90).

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE ZULU LANGUAGE COURSE

In the last part of this article I aim to remark on a number of aspects of the ZCUU01-A course in order to contribute to its refinement and improvement for future learners.

In respect of the study material (Study Guide) the following aspects will be touched on: inclusion of advance organisers, the value of a situation analysis, inclusion of answers to homework exercises, and the need for a glossary. The audio tape cassette, which is part of the study package, also warrants a number of comments on: its purpose within the study package, the need for a bilingual approach, the function of the material included in the recording and its value for proper pronunciation.

Study material

"Advance organisers" are diagrammatical models that highlight the structure of a course or discipline and "supply a permanent frame of reference to guide the student into the intricacies of a discipline" (Du Plessis 1981a:12). The CZUU01-A course book (study guide) unfortunately lacks even the most basic of organisers, ie a table of contents, that could serve to supply the learner with an overall view of the course. A visual organiser at the beginning of the Guide could indicate the basic concepts to be discussed in the course, eg greetings, nouns, verbs, present tense, past tense, future tense; together with their relationships as set out systematically in the course (cf Du Plessis 1981b:13,14). The functions of this kind of diagram are: (Swart 1982:5)

- to provide learners with an overall view of the course
- to serve as a summary of the syllabus
- to serve as a starting point for class discussions
- to serve as a basic frame of reference for the course.

Earlier in this article I supplied an autobiographical note on my motivation for enrolling for this course in conversational Zulu. Both Hau-Yoon (for the Mandarin Chinese course) and Garmashova (for Russian language courses), as previously mentioned, reported on the situation analysis that they conducted during the planning phase of their courses. This was done to determine the objectives for their respective courses. Garmashova (1996:96) found that two of the results of the survey conducted were that prospective students wished (1) to acquire the speaking skills to use in oral contact with Russian speakers, and (2) to become acquainted with the customs of Russian people and to learn more about Russia in general. These were exactly the reasons why I wanted to enroll for the Zulu language course. The conversation part was definitely accomplished. Although aspects of the Zulu culture were conveyed to us in passing (eg who greets first), this was not part of the course and therefore found to be wanting. A sound situation analysis for the Zulu course would have picked up the real needs of learners, which could have been included more comprehensively in the design of the course.

As a learner, I really missed having answers to the homework exercises close at hand while doing my homework (formative assessment). Having the answers readily available became especially important because, due to time constraints, entire homework exercises could not be marked within the limit of one class lesson. The result was that a considerable portion of my efforts went unassessed.

As mentioned earlier, this course really supplies one with the skill to construct one's own original sentences on the topics discussed in the Guide. However, I found it frustrating trying to trace an expression or word that I wanted to use in a "new" sentence, but could not trace because it was lost somewhere in the Guide. The study guide lacked a glossary. An alphabetical (according to the English equivalents) list of those words that appear in the vocabulary lists would surely assist a learner in creating more "new" sentences for more "new" situations.

Educational media

Countless pieces of research have shown that the integration of media into the teaching-learning activity is highly recommended. For this reason it is highly appreciated that an audio cassette is included in this Zulu course. Media should, however, be seen as an integral part of the overall process of teaching development (Le Roux 1991:50f). I am of the opinion that the audio cassette for CZUU01-A could have played a more integrated role in the course as a whole. The following discussion will highlight this point of view.

Although the course contained a face-to-face element (once a week) the learner was still, for the rest of the time, a distance learner. For this reason I as a learner would have preferred a more personalised approach on the cassette. The following few suggestions will suffice: the

speakers could have introduced themselves to the learner; a clear statement of the purpose of the cassette and the way the material fits into the rest of the course could have been given at the beginning of the cassette; a word of motivation to continue using the cassette, because of its role within the whole course, would have been appreciated; examples of everyday uses of the language would have brought real life experiences into play; a few seconds of traditional Zulu music between discussions would have highlighted the fact that language forms the doorway to culture.

Although it is true that an audio cassette should form an integral part of a broader course, it is wise to design it in such a manner that it could also be used as a self-contained unit. Let me explain. As learner of a foreign language I wanted to use each and every opportunity to hear and to practise this new language. For instance, while driving in my car I want to listen to a cassette that is self-explanatory to such an extent that I do not have to have my study guide in front of me. However, the material on the ZCUU01-A cassette is only in Zulu. Being a beginner in this foreign language, I found it difficult to follow everything while listening to the cassette without the study guide in front of me, a fact that was not conducive to my learning experience. I would have preferred that a part of the cassette was in English or provided translations of the Zulu so that I could follow the material with more comprehension.

I was disappointed that the cassette did not supply a summary of any semantic theory as discussed in the guide. This is closely linked to the previous point. What a learner needs is a quick reminder, in the form of a discussion on the tape, of the "rules" underlying the exercises. I found it extremely strange that the content of the cassette consisted purely of class exercises; exercises that were already discussed during the face-to-face sessions. Although the material on the cassette provided tremendous support regarding the pronunciation of the Zulu words and expressions, it remains a repetition of work already covered in the classroom. It would provide greater support if the cassette could rather cover the homework exercises. This could have included a discussion of the construction of the homework sentences together with the correct answer. Following such a discussion on the cassette while doing the homework exercise would have been of much greater help than just re-listening to the class exercises.

CONCLUSION

Learning is all about mastering new or "foreign" information with the aim of understanding and applying it, whether it is vocabulary (languages), a variety of perspectives on past events (history) or an attempt to reconstruct the customs of ancient societies (archaeology). The book by Van Schoor et al (2001) contains a number of helpful study techniques for learners who have to master new information. However, it is not enough merely to prescribe this book to Unisa students and expect them to make sense of it and to apply those study techniques on their own. Van Schoor himself (1987:70) states that lecturers should take the responsibility for the academic support of their students. In this context, academic support in distance education means teaching learners - not just telling learners about - the art of learning and showing them how to apply these learning techniques to their specific types of material (whether it is language, science, numbers or narratives). It was my aim to apply certain aspects of mnemonics to the learning of Zulu vocabulary.

It was also my aim to recognise and reflect on my positive experience with CZUU01-A and to recommend ways of improving the course in order to provide future learners with an even more efficient and effective distance learning experience.

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