**Towards Effective Communication: IsiXhosa Language Learning and the Need for Bilingual Dictionaries in Health Sciences Education**

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**ABSTRACT**

South Africa is a multilingual country consisting of 12 official languages recognised by the Constitution (1996). This recognition marks a significant departure from the pre-1994 era, where only English and Afrikaans were official languages. In such a diverse country, a bilingual policy was bound to lead to inequality, especially in healthcare, where African language speakers were not catered for. The Bill of Rights affirms everyone’s right “to access healthcare services” (Section 27). The Constitution also guarantees language rights for all official language speakers. The Use of Official Languages Act (2012) operationalises this by requiring government departments to adopt a language policy identifying at least three languages for official use. In line with post-colonial language research, the concept of linguistic human rights has gained prominence, asserting that individuals have the right to use their language and to receive education and public services in the language of their choice (cf. Skutnabb Kangas & Robert Philipson 1995).

According to Mhlauli (2016: 57), in the SA healthcare sector, “full realization of these rights is the ability of the patient to be able to be heard, and to hear what is said regarding their health and general wellbeing.” This underscores the need for healthcare professionals to be equipped to counsel patients in Languages Other than English (LOTE). In response, UCT introduced a language component in the MBChB programme in 2003, with isiXhosa and Afrikaans as the chosen languages, based on provincial demographics. The programme was later expanded to other health sciences such as the rehabilitation sciences.

Using a questionnaire survey, this study investigates the existence or absence of a dictionary culture for second language learners of isiXhosa in the rehabilitation sciences. It also explores whether these learners are interested in an online dictionary and what kind of information they expect from it. According to Mtuze (1992), isiXhosa lexicography dates back to 18th-century travellers and missionaries. Nkomo and Wababa (2013) observe that most isiXhosa dictionaries produced since then have been bilingual and unidirectional, mainly aimed at second language learners rather than mother tongue speakers. The first monolingual isiXhosa dictionary was only published in 2008. This is unsurprising, given that early dictionaries were created primarily to support missionary goals rather than serve isiXhosa-speaking communities.

Despite isiXhosa’s long lexicographic history, the number of available dictionaries remains limited, especially compared to English and Afrikaans. Even if a dictionary culture exists within UCT’s rehabilitation sciences, access to suitable isiXhosa dictionaries is limited. This scarcity partly motivated the creation of the *IsiXhosa.click* online dictionary by UCT students, who identified a lack of accessible digital resources (cf. Marquard 2024). Rehabilitation students may benefit from *IsiXhosa.click* as a key reference tool, especially since classroom time is limited. Its accessibility also allows for continued use after graduation.

Tarp (2008) offers two key insights for dictionary use in foreign or second language learning: compilers must understand why learners are studying the language, and what their attitudes are toward it. This is important for students required to learn isiXhosa, and for dictionary makers like *the IsiXhosa.click* team. The data presented in this paper will offer insight into the dictionary culture of UCT rehabilitation sciences students and their expectations of online isiXhosa resources.

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